Tradition as a Viable Option for Protestant Theology: the Vincentian Method of Thomas C. Oden

Kwabena Donkor
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TRADITION AS A VIABLE OPTION FOR PROTESTANT
THEOLOGY: THE VINCENTIAN METHOD
OF THOMAS C. ODEN

A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Kwabena Donkor
March 2001
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A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

TRADITION AS A Viable OPTION FOR PROTESTANT THEOLOGY: THE VINCENTIAN METHOD OF THOMAS C. ODEN

by

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Adviser: Fernando Luis Canale
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University
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Title: TRADITION AS A VIABLE OPTION FOR PROTESTANT THEOLOGY: THE VINCENTIAN METHOD OF THOMAS C. ODEN

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This dissertation analyzes Thomas Oden's theological method in order to understand its structural elements, and thereby, to facilitate a clearer comprehension of his commitment to the classic Christian tradition in the context of the increasing contemporary emphasis on postmodernism in Protestant theology. Given Oden's affirmation of the Christian tradition and his simultaneous commitment to postmodern sensitivities, the dissertation strives to examine how Oden is able to harmonize what essentially appears to be a dialectical situation. Thus, although the emphasis on tradition in Oden raises the perennial issue of Scripture versus Tradition, the postmodern question raises the issue beyond the usual Scripture-Tradition controversy.
to a fundamental concern regarding the compatibility of the postmodern agenda and the classic Protestant tradition.

The introductory chapter defines the problem which Oden's Vincentian method is designed to solve, and delineates the objectives, method, and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of Oden's theological development, noting his major concerns and the influences that have shaped him. In this chapter Oden's shift from liberalism to classical orthodoxy is considered. Chapter 3 develops a formal, theoretical structure for understanding method in general. The formal structure developed in this chapter is subsequently applied in chapter 4 to describe and analyze Oden's Vincentian method.

The final chapter evaluates Oden's method in terms of the coherence of its parts and the consistency of its application. In this chapter, some tensions in the structure of Oden's method are noted with a few suggestions regarding what adjustments to the system may need to be made.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Theology after the Enlightenment took a new turn in several ways.¹ Old dogmas would no longer be accepted merely on the basis that they formed a part of the received system of church doctrine. Thinking individuals desired to be convinced that their beliefs were reasonable as they sought to harmonize religious affirmations with those universally discernible.² In a word, the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement was a challenge to argument from authority.

Prior to this period, it is generally agreed that the predominant methodology for systematic theology had been mainly deductive.³ The basic premise for this line of reasoning was the accepted concept of revelation at the time. Revelation was understood to be objective,


²Ibid.

³Carl F. H. Henry, Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 37-38. Henry acknowledges that in the 12th century Thomas Acquinas proposed an empirical alternative, yet by and large, the deductive method prevailed even into the nineteenth century.
conceptual, and propositional. Hence there was a basic coherence between revelation and deductive reasoning which Henry expressed in this epistemological axiom.

Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle. . . . The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of biblical revelation as an orderly whole.

The core of the pre-Enlightenment methodological tradition was, therefore, considered to be a nucleus of truth inextricably connected with revelation. Progress in theology required only a deductive development of ideas from the core revelational deposit.

Today, Christian theology is pursued with various epistemological foundations. Indeed, contemporary

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3See Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 37. Pinnock and Brown observe that whereas in the earlier centuries theologians followed a fairly uniform method (the Scriptures were cited continually to establish sacred truth), with the rise of biblical criticism such uniform appeal to Scripture is questioned. Thus Raymond J. DeVette remarks that the deductive approach has the unhappy consequence of "making revelation propositional and of confining its development to the deductive logic of medieval syllogisms. . . . Today's philosophy has gone far beyond the classical deductive syllogism" ("Progress and Pluralism in Theology," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974): 464.

theology, in sympathy with postmodernism, celebrates epistemological pluralism without absolute, fixed certainties or foundations.\footnote{Werner G. Jeanrond and Jennifer L. Rike, eds., \textit{Radical Pluralism and Truth} (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1991), xvii. Tracy's view to truth is that, in a primordial sense, it is manifestation. This leads him to affirm a dialogical conservational and hermeneutical approach to theology. In this system, however, a claim to any manifestation necessarily implies a claim to a relative adequacy for that interpretation. From this perspective, it would seem that no absolute viewpoint of the whole is possible, only a moving viewpoint. Although he conceives of a move from a model of truth as primordial manifestation to truth as warranted consensus, there is always a process of re-evaluation. See David Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity} (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishing, 1987), 29.}

Consequently, the current state of affairs in theology finds expression in the phenomenon of theological pluralism. Pluralism states that there is nothing but the plural, the multiple, and the manifold, and that this is the nature of ultimate reality.\footnote{Heinrich Fries, "Theological Reflections on the Problem of Pluralism," \textit{Theological Studies} 28 (1967): 3-26.} Indeed, it is more accurate to talk about two kinds of pluralisms. Radical pluralism, which conceptualizes ultimate reality as manifold and multiple, stands in the

92, to observe that the collapse of theological authority is attributed to two turning points in the history of epistemology. First is the rejection of medieval concepts of knowledge based on the study of authorities and deductive reasoning in favor of modern foundationalism (whether intuitionist or empirical). This turning point coincides with Descartes. The second turning point which is still in progress is the preference shown for a holistic approach to knowledge where no one part is deemed basic to the other part. For a summary review of the British experience of this attitude see David L. Edwards, \textit{Tradition and Truth} (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 9-29.
tradition of Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive postmodernism and is rooted in Hegel, Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. On the other hand, the pluralism that is advocated by revisionary theologians such as David Tracy and David Ray Griffin posits an Ultimate that is variably reflected in the hermeneutical process. Although the Ultimate is conceptualized, the absolute viewpoint is never captured; it is always a moving, relatively adequate viewpoint.

Pluralism in contemporary theology is an offspring of the modern turn to the subject. Fries argues that the reality which will not go away and which seeks expression in pluralism is man, his individuality, his freedom, and his originality. This modern alternative to the traditional


2Jeanrond and Rike, xxii.


4Fries, "Theological Reflections," 14. See also Karl Rahner, "Philosophy and Philosophising in Theology," in Theological Investigations (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), 46-63. In Rahner’s view the growing differentiation and complexity of philosophies, and hence of theology, originate at bottom, in a "pluralism of the human sources of experience, which can never be adequately comprehended" (53). Indeed, this means that "a comprehensive system of knowledge and education is no longer possible... Every theologian will bring to his theology the particular form, the historical and fragmentary nature of his own given
foundations of classical theology brings into sharp focus the question of truth.¹ What is truth and how shall we establish it in Christian theology?

The question about truth is par excellence an epistemological question, and absolute relativism is the answer given to it by the modern, pluralist alternative.² The pluralist answer to the question of truth, however, raises concern even among some modern, revisionist theologians who would wish not only to combat "the rising forces of neo-authoritarianism," but also "disallow a collapse of consensus in the face of a mindless, chaotic understanding of existence. He will no longer entertain the innocent naiveté of earlier times in thinking that his contribution alone is what is important and decisive, truly metaphysical and supra-historical. . . . Each theology and philosophy knows too much to be merely itself, and too little to become the only Theology or Philosophy" (53-57).


pluralism of pure subjectivities" by developing a methodological consensus.¹

The modern pluralist alternative to the question of truth raises serious concerns for conservative Protestant theology because, as an ideology, pluralism is not impressed by assertions on the part of evangelicals to the effect that Christian values and beliefs are true.² Conservative Protestantism rejects this pluralist alternative and its answer to the question of truth since it denies the very essence of Christianity and its unique claim to revealed truth.

As conservative Protestant theologians interact with the arguments in favor of the modern view, a specific alternative solution to the modern pluralistic approach appears to be emphasized more and more, namely tradition. Clark Pinnock, for instance, observes that in many places one sees the catholicizing of evangelicalism as a result of liberal pressure.³ More and more, evangelicals are returning to the idea of a rule of faith and ecclesiastical


³Clark Pinnock, "How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology," TSF Bulletin 6, no. 1 (1983): 2-5. Pinnock sees evidences of this in the convocation of Catholics and Evangelicals, the founding of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, and the starting of new journals like New Oxford Review.
authority.¹ Alan Race recognizes that tradition is now regaining a central place as a major factor in Christian theology. Race observes that the bid to recapture tradition is a reactive response to the prospects of pluralism in religion which has precipitated a sense of disorientation in the life of faith.² Consequently, as early as 1975 David Wells had hinted that tradition could become the meeting place for Catholic and Evangelical theology.³ It seems that the emphasis that a section of contemporary evangelical theology is placing on the significance of tradition stems from the conviction that tradition, as a response to the liberal alternative, serves to insulate the community of faith from excessive theological speculation and pluralism.⁴

The critical question that the resurgence of tradition in conservative Protestant theology raises and which underlies this dissertation is this: Is the turn to

¹Ibid.


⁴The emphasis on tradition in evangelical theology today reminds us of the importance of method as the context within which discourse on contemporary theology acquires intelligibility. In connection with the growing significance of tradition, Pinnock underlines the essential methodological nature of the issue by posing the following question as expressive to the central dilemma: "Given the challenge of religious liberalism, how do I remain evangelical without becoming Catholic?" (Pinnock, "How I Use Tradition," 2).
tradition, as a response to the modern and postmodern alternatives, a viable response for conservative Protestant theology? The question about viability really resolves itself in several directions depending on how the response from tradition is construed. Is the response from tradition to the contemporary pluralistic situation to be construed along the basic Catholic epistemological stance on Scripture and tradition? If tradition is so construed, it leaves the theological enterprise still in the "house of authority," in addition to the fact that it ceases to be Protestant. If the response from tradition is constituted differently from the Catholic epistemological stance, it could be employed from a postmodern outlook. T. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, for example, claims a place for tradition in a postfoundationalist theology where "the primary task of the critical theologian is to examine the tradition, not just to repeat it, and through critically examining the tradition to allow the present to be reshaped more closely along the lines of what the tradition truly stands for." Van

1Catholic theology is quite clear about the fact that one of its characteristics, "as distinct from most Protestant theology, is its adherence to tradition as a divinely authoritative norm, on a par with Scripture itself." See Avery Dulles, The Craft of Theology (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), 87.


Huyssteent definitely emphasizes the role of tradition, but this is hardly from a conservative Protestant standpoint. His approach calls for the theologian to stand in a critical relation to the tradition "and thereby split the difference between modernity and postmodernity."¹ But this approach hardly solves the problem of pluralism.² Altogether, the emphasis on tradition in many constructive postmodern theologies, even that of scholars such as David Ray Griffin working in the context of process theology, calls for a closer look at the contemporary emphasis on tradition.³ If tradition construed from either the Catholic epistemological stance or the constructive postmodern viewpoint raises questions about its viability from a conservative Protestant viewpoint, is there a midway role for tradition in theology where it is both conservative and postmodern? To conduct such a research on tradition as a viable methodological option to the modernist and postmodernist alternative cannot be reasonably conceived within the Catholic tradition where there is no explicit claim to formulate theology in

¹Ibid., 215.

²Van Huyssteent himself takes it as axiomatic that "as theologians we have learned by now, it is hoped, to avoid the arrogance of prescribing overarching, basic rules for interdisciplinary dialogue" (ibid.).

faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* principle. Consequently, the constitution of tradition as a theological methodology to be applied in faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* principle is theoretically possible only within the conservative Protestant tradition.

Thomas C. Oden: A Case Study

The possibility of the study of the viability of tradition as a methodological alternative to the modernist and postmodernist approach to theology within a school that at the same time maintains faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* principle acquires intelligibility with the prior existence of such a methodological approach. In assessing the viability of a theological methodology based on tradition within the Protestant tradition, the approach of Thomas C. Oden is chosen for this dissertation. The reason for selecting Oden’s theology as a case to study the viability of tradition as a methodological alternative is mainly due to the fact that he represents a group of theologians who are "rediscovering the neglected beauty of classical Christian teaching." Indeed, Oden has translated the classical role of tradition into an explicit theological method, a brief outline of which is given below under the justification of this research for this dissertation.

---

From a methodological point of view, therefore, Oden satisfies the condition of possibility for this study in the following way. On the one hand, though a Wesleyan, Oden plainly states his belief in the Westminster Catechism on the point that "the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify God." In the same context, he affirms belief in the Second Helvetic Reformed Confession to the effect that we should allow the exegesis of the Fathers only so far as it agrees with Scripture.\(^1\) In a personal interview with Oden he reaffirmed his strong belief in the *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fides* principles.

At the same time, Oden announces that "the agenda for theology at the end of the twentieth century . . . is to begin to prepare the postmodern Christian community for its third millennium by returning again to the careful study and respectful following of the central tradition of classical Christian exegesis."\(^2\) Furthermore, Oden intends to recognize the Eastern patristic tradition as "the base layer of the subsequent Christian exegesis and moral reflection."\(^3\) Thus the need to integrate tradition into contemporary


\(^3\)Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 59.
theology via the Church Fathers becomes the central concern of Oden's theological agenda. Clark Pinnock mentions Oden as a foremost representative theologian in calling evangelical theologians to look to the early church for the resources with which to counter apostasy in the church. But could it be that while Oden professes faithfulness to the primacy of Scripture, in practice his methodology subordinates Scripture to tradition?

The fact that Oden has translated the use of tradition into a methodological option is not the only reason that substantiates the relevance of his work as subject matter for a doctoral dissertation. In the latest *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, Thomas Oden has been accorded a place among noted evangelical theologians. Among the reasons for his inclusion in the handbook, the following are explicitly stated: His massive three-volume systematic theology has earned critical acclaim. Next, the extent of Oden's publications places him in the category of the prolific. Finally, Oden is included because of his remarkable and uncommon pilgrimage from ardent liberalism to classical orthodoxy. It seems significant that Oden now champions a movement to recover and reappropriate the


2Ibid., 401.

3Ibid.
historic and apostolic roots of the faith as a response to another movement, liberalism, which hitherto had claimed his allegiance and support. It seems indeed appropriate that a dissertation on a subject so central to his interest should be written.

Justification of This Research

Before a proper statement of the problem could be adequately formulated, I need to perceive, in its broader context, the issue with which we are concerned. According to Oden, the method which he calls "consensual"\(^1\) or "Vincentian"\(^2\) was already operative during the first Christian millennium.\(^3\) The goal of this orthodox theological method is to recover the doctrinal teachings of the apostles. According to Oden, the consensual method requires more than anything else a good, clear memory.\(^4\) The theological method of ancient ecumenical orthodoxy here called the Vincentian method is what Oden suggests should be adopted by post-critical Christian classicism as a corrective to the distortions of contemporary theology.\(^5\)

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\(^1\)Oden, *After Modernity--What?*, 160.

\(^2\)Oden, "The Long Journey Home," 79. The method is named after Vincent of Lerins, who defined orthodoxy as "what has been believed everywhere, always and by all."

\(^3\)Oden, *After Modernity--What?*, 160.

\(^4\)Ibid., 163.

\(^5\)Ibid., 162.
a methodological resource, the Vincentian method "responds to ever new challenges, guided by ancient ecumenical consensus as it was led by the Holy Spirit. . . . Orthodoxy does not search for a consensus of current opinion, but for the apostolic consensus that itself had been repeatedly reaffirmed and defined by the previous ecumenical councils."¹ In sum, Oden's consensual methodology proposes "a return to the normative self-restrictions that prevailed in Christianity's first millennium"² because of what he regards as its close adherence to apostolic faith and the more complete ecumenical consensus which was achieved in that period than any period since.³ Furthermore, this consensus has been subsequently affirmed by Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions.⁴

The fact that the consensual methodology suggested by Oden stands in need of technical assessment is evident from the varied responses to Oden's methodological proposal within evangelical circles. On the one hand, J. I. Packer appears to favor Oden's approach when he identifies the latter's method with what he rather calls the evangelical method, a method which "involves setting up a three-way conversation in which the Christian heritage of

¹Ibid., 163.
²Ibid., 160.
³Ibid., 161.
⁴Ibid.
understanding, which is called tradition, is given a place alongside the head-scratchings of today . . . for generating and guiding interpretive reflection on the inspired Scriptures.1 Similarly, David L. Thompson has observed that Oden's Agenda for Theology was a path-finding book.2

On the other hand, Cornelius Plantinga, although sympathetic to Oden's theological shift, worries about an unquestioned acceptance of traditional consensus. The basis of his concern is what he calls the "epistemological shyness" in some of the Fathers for which reason they did not hesitate to borrow from Plotinus.3 In like manner, Donald Bloesch acknowledges the nostalgia for orthodoxy, though he wonders whether true orthodoxy can ever be associated with any one particular period in the history of


3Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Response to Thomas C. Oden, 'The Long Journey Home',' Journal of Evangelical Theological Society 34 (1991): 93-96. Plantinga raises the question: "Must we simply accept the patristic consensus on God's relation to time, for instance, as if theories of God's having created time or God's being outside time or God's existing in all time or simultaneously were the only or even the most natural way to state theologically the biblical testimony on God's transcendence with respect to time? No . . . we cannot assume that the patristic consensus gives us Scripture unalloyed, nor that hellenistic alloys are obviously more desirable than Hegelian ones. The same alertness we bring to Moltmann or Gordon Kaufman must mark our reading of the classic tradition" (95).
the church. He specifically questions the legitimacy of the first millennium on grounds of its compromise of the biblical teachings of "sola gratia" and "sola fide."²

Statement of the Problem

Within this larger context, the particular problem to be addressed in this dissertation is the viability of utilizing tradition as the basis of a theological methodology while at the same time maintaining the Protestant Scripture principle. Thomas C. Oden's suggestion of consensual methodology for an evangelical theology that maintains the sola scriptura principle in a postmodern cultural context has been chosen as a case study for evaluating such a methodology. The fundamental question that needs to be explored is whether a theological methodology based on the consensus of church tradition can be applied in our contemporary historical setting without contradicting the sola scriptura principle and still maintain its inner coherence.

Purpose of Study

On the theological landscape, this dissertation may be placed within the area of Fundamental Theology, where


²Ibid. To Bloesch's thinking, the key to the recovery of orthodoxy is a reappropriation of the gospel attested in the Holy Scripture rather than a return to any period in the past.
theology as a cognitive enterprise is critically examined regarding its nature, function, ground, and methodology. Within this area, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the works of Thomas C. Oden in order to establish the viability of his Vincentian methodology vis-à-vis the sola scriptura principle in our postmodern context. Is Oden able to develop his consensual methodology in harmony with the Westminster Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession’s belief in the sola scriptura principle? Does he depend on the Bible for the necessary epistemologic foundation for his theology or does he depend on tradition, philosophy, and science? Primarily, then, this dissertation is an enquiry into the first epistemological principles instrumental in Oden’s consensual methodology with the specific purpose of clarifying and assessing whether such a methodology is compatible with the role the Bible plays when the sola scriptura principle is accepted as determinative in theological reflection.

**Research Methodology**

The methodology that this dissertation adopts in analyzing the viability of Oden’s consensual methodology vis-à-vis his acceptance of the sola scriptura principle is a phenomenological description and analysis of the theoretical formulation of his consensual methodology. A careful analytical description of his methodology at this
theoretical level is a necessary step that will allow me to express and evaluate Oden's consensual methodology.

How shall one proceed in doing this careful analytical description of Oden's methodology? In his *The Living God*, Oden devotes one of the four sections in the volume to issues that bear directly on theological methodology, namely Scripture, reason, faith, experience, tradition, the quadrilateral, and the ordering of sources. Furthermore, there are elements scattered elsewhere in Oden's writings which shed light on his method. On the basis of the foregoing, I hope to provide a systematic presentation of Oden's method as the grounds for the evaluation of its presuppositions and its inner coherence. The main components of the basic structure of the theological method that is utilized as broad categories to describe and evaluate Oden's methodology are identified first. This structure is instrumental in the process of analyzing and evaluating Oden's methodology. The systematic analysis of Oden's method is undertaken by inquiring into the way he interprets the main components of the structure of theological method, namely, hermeneutical presuppositions, purpose of theology, and the nature and use of data in theology.

Next, an evaluation of Oden's methodology is attempted. The evaluation of Oden's method simply seeks to establish whether his methodological proposal is consistent
within itself, with the Protestant Scripture principle, and with his commitment to the Vincentian method as it relates to the classical orthodox consensus of the first millennium, especially the consensus of the first five centuries. I am not interested here with the truth status of Oden's theology but rather with a formal consideration of the consistency and coherence of his methodological principles.

The scope of this dissertation is contained within some practical and logical limits. First, in pursuing the objective of outlining Oden's methodology, the focus is on his published works subsequent to his turn to classic orthodoxy. Oden points to the mid-seventies as the point of departure for his present thinking. This limitation is due to the fact that his consensual methodology arose from his turn to classic orthodoxy. Accordingly, the secondary literature on the issues raised concerning his methodology also has the same focus.

The investigation of Oden's consensual methodology is somewhat related to the broader, older debate on Scripture and Tradition. This dissertation, however, has a different perspective in the sense that it focuses on the methodological issues involved in turning tradition into a Protestant theological methodology. Therefore, I do not involve myself with the pros and cons of the issue of Tradition and/or Scripture, although on occasion, references to it are appropriate.
In investigating Oden's presuppositions, issues in epistemology, ontology, and system are discussed. My intention is not to get involved in the ongoing philosophical discussions on these topics or even their application in philosophy of religion. I use these categories in a limited way as tools for analyzing the structure of his theological thought.

Plan of Study

The application of the research methodology in order to accomplish the purpose of this dissertation requires the following procedure. Chapter 1 introduces the issue of theological pluralism as constitutive of the liberal alternative to traditional theological perspective. Next, I consider the advocacy of tradition as a response to the pluralistic alternative and mention briefly the case of Thomas C. Oden. The purpose, methodology, and limitations of the dissertation are then stated. Chapter 2 focuses on Oden, with special reference to his theological pilgrimage and shift as well as his agenda as a response to the modern and postmodern way of doing theology. It shows that Oden's theological agenda is fundamentally a methodological proposal.

Chapter 3 attempts to outline some general, formal principles for analyzing theological methodologies. The outline of formal principles for analyzing theological methodologies is instrumental in the analysis and evaluation
of Oden's consensual theology. Chapter 4 takes up the specific consideration of Oden's consensual theological methodology at the theoretical level. Oden's methodology is discussed and analyzed in four stages. The first step is constituted by his hermeneutical presuppositions, which consider Oden's epistemological, ontological and systemic assumptions that condition his whole theological enterprise.\(^1\) The second deals with Oden's understanding of the goal of theology, and the third step considers Oden's classification and ordering of the sources of theology.

Finally, I deal with Oden's methodology as method proper, i.e., method as activity." Chapter 5 seeks to evaluate Oden's methodology as outlined in chapter 4 on the basis of its internal consistency and coherence with the consensus of the first millennium of Christianity, especially the first five centuries of classical orthodox consensus.

Before I examine Oden's method, I wish to situate his theological efforts by outlining his personal background from the perspective of his education, career and theological interests. These factors often go a long way to determine how a theologian perceives and undertakes the theological enterprise.

\(^1\)The various steps in this discussion are clarified in chapter 3 where an attempt is made to provide the formal principles for analyzing theological methodology.
CHAPTER 2

THOMAS C. ODEN: THE MAN AND THEOLOGIAN

Introduction

The one overriding factor that has brought attention to Oden's work in recent years has been his conversion from a movement theologian who, in his own words, was afflicted with "addictive accommodationism" to a theologian who is championing postmodern orthodoxy. To what extent does the change in stance imply a corresponding shift in perspective regarding the nature of the theological task itself as well as the manner in which the task may be approached?

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify and understand the nature of Oden's change of views, the significant steps involved, and the influences that may be responsible for the change. These issues are connected to the goal of this research, which is to understand Oden's method as a viable program for evangelical theology in its interaction with contemporary theological pluralism. It is

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^1 \text{Oden, } \textit{Agenda for Theology, 22. Oden employs this phrase to describe his overall interest and pursuit of different movements with the aim "diligently to learn from them, to throw himself into them, and then eventually to baptize them as if they were identical with the Christian centre" (ibid.).} \]

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impossible to understand Oden's present theological interest and program in a vacuum. This is especially the case since Oden does not himself see his present work as a negation of the earlier. These issues regarding the apparent change of views in Oden, however, are connected inextricably with Oden's life and background,¹ hence I directed my search to include aspects of Oden's life that are pertinent to the issues at hand.

Although Oden has argued that his work as a defender of orthodoxy should not be seen necessarily as a negation or disowning of his earlier work,² it is clearly possible to delineate an early Oden from a late Oden. This discussion follows this demarcation, keeping in mind that the boundary line may not be sharply defined. Under the early Oden we will consider his educational background as well as key theological interests and influences during this formative period. Consideration of the late Oden focuses on the


²Oden, "Recovering Lost Identity," 8.
nature of his theological transition and the possible influences responsible for it, as well as the completion of that transition.

The Early Oden

In presenting the early Oden, I endeavor to adopt a chronological approach with the hope that this method will best expose the contributing influences in the development of Oden's theological thinking.

Educational and Professional Background

Born in 1931 to committed Methodist parents, Thomas Clark Oden describes himself as having come from a "centrist American Protestant tradition," although on the larger cultural landscape he sees his background as "culturally accommodative." Oden's academic training earned him a B.A. at the University of Oklahoma (1953), B.D. from Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University (1956), M.A. from Yale University (1958), and a Ph.D. from Yale in 1960. Oden's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Idea of Obedience in Contemporary Protestant Ethics*, sought to bring together Rudolf Bultmann's existential view of obedience and Karl Bultmann's existential view of obedience and Karl

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1This account of Oden's educational and professional background is indebted in part to Charles Brummett's work in "Recovering Pastoral Theology: The Agenda of Thomas Oden."


3Ibid.
Barth's christological view of obedience. It may be worth mentioning that Oden's supervisory committee included H. Richard Niebuhr, James Gustafson, and Schubert Ogden.

At Perkins, Oden would come under the influence of two individuals who would have an enduring impact on him: Joseph W. Matthews, for his ecclesiology and search for a ground for theological ethics; and Albert Outler, for the role of historic church tradition in contemporary theological reflection.

The decade from 1960-1970 found Oden at Philips University, Oklahoma, first as Associate Professor of Theology and Pastoral Care (1960-1963) and then as Professor of Theology and Ethics (1963-1970). This decade saw the development of Oden's interest in the interface between theology and psychotherapy, both in writing and practice.

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1 Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 5.

2 Regarding Outler, Oden writes, "My first and best teacher of Christian theology was and is Albert C. Outler, who awakened my love of Augustine, of Wesley . . . ." (The Word of Life, 217).

3 Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 15.

Presently, Oden serves as the Henry Anson Butz Professor of Theology (1981-) at Drew University, New Jersey, where he moved in 1970 and served first as Professor of Theology (1970-80).

Theological Interests

As noted above, one of the key academic and practical concerns of Oden was the dialogue between theology and psychotherapy. An understanding of the development of this interest in Oden is important because out of it grows his theological concerns and concepts.

Two main currents in theological circles were discernible during the post-World War II years when Oden received the bulk of his theological education. First, theology came under the immense influence of neoorthodoxy, a movement which in some respects reflected a response of disillusionment with liberal theology following the wars. Second, modern pastoral care began to emerge around the same time, being influenced and responding, as it were, to Freudian and post-Freudian psychotherapies.¹

Oden’s theological interests naturally arose out of this post-War milieu, his primary interest being to bring

Awareness Game (New York: Harper and Row, 1976); and Guilt-Free (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980). Oden’s therapeutic experience includes counselor at psychiatric institutions and chaplain and group facilitator at several facilities (Brummett, 293).

¹Brummett, 19.
For Oden to have conceived of the very possibility of such a dialogue implied a certain understanding on his part of the nature of theology. At this time, Oden made a distinction between theology and Christian theology. Theology represented a general discipline which makes a deliberate and systematic attempt "to speak self-consistently of man's predicament, redemption and authenticity." From this perspective, psychotherapy may be seen as a secularized theology. On the other hand, Christian theology, to Oden, was a secondary reflective activity, focusing on the "Christian faith" and seeking internal and logical consistency. Thus Christian theology has the narrower task of clarifying "faith's understanding of the particular idea of God, peculiar to the Christian community, the idea of God as revealed in Jesus Christ."

Having thus distinguished secular theology (psychotherapy) from Christian theology, Oden made himself

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1 For a more complete discussion of Oden's dialogue with psychotherapy, see James Shackelford, "An Analysis of the Utilization of Psychotherapy as a Model in Contemporary Theology Through the Study of Its Use in Thomas C. Oden, Daniel Day Williams, Gregory Baum, and Paul Tillich" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975), 37-85.

2 Oden, _Kerygma and Counseling_, 83.

3 Brummett, 20.

4 Oden, _Kerygma and Counseling_, 31.

5 Oden, _The Structure of Awareness_, 87-88.
room for creative theological reflection.¹ The task that
Oden sets himself to undertake is to show how the
psychotherapeutic process is analogous to God's self-
disclosure. Oden is assuming that the disclosure of
acceptance by the therapist that underlies effective secular
psychotherapy has implicit ontological assumptions which are
made explicit in the kerygma.²

Formative Influence: Karl Barth,
Carl Rogers, Rudolf Bultmann,
and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Oden's theological move, based on his assumptions
about psychotherapy noted above, is made on the basis of
insights from certain key individuals. From Karl Barth,
Oden adopts the idea of analogia fidei which he evaluates as
"unique, mature and fresh basis for dialogue with therapy in
a way totally impossible for liberal Protestantism."³ By

¹James Schackelford notes at least four factors that
led Oden to turn to the culture of psychotherapy. First, it
provided a context for creative reflection; second, it
offered a plausible way for speaking of God; third, it
provided Oden the opportunity to bring forth the fundamental
presuppositions of evangelical theology; fourth, Oden's
personal involvement in both theology and psychotherapy led
him to conceive possible affinities between the two
(Schackelford, 47-51).

²Oden makes this point repeatedly. See Oden,
Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy, 18-19; idem,

³Oden, Kerygma and Counseling, 115. In a general
sense, analogia fidei refers to the "use of a general sense
of the meaning of Scripture, constructed from the clear or
unambiguous loci . . . as the basis for interpreting unclear
or ambiguous texts" (Richard A. Mueller, Dictionary of Latin
and Greek Theological Terms [Grand Rapids: Baker Books,
way of the analogia fidei Oden argues that human knowledge is possible because humankind has already been known. Similarly human acceptance is possible because humankind has been accepted. Thus by analogia fidei Oden is able to anticipate God's revelation in the therapeutic process. Oden's aim in making this move is to "think through the therapeutic process from the perspective of its being illuminated by the empathic love of God in Jesus Christ as the ontological basis for secular healing."¹

From Carl Rogers's client-centered therapy Oden elaborates on the idea of ontological assumption of acceptance which is at the root of any effective form of therapy. He argues that Rogers's concept of the accepting reality of being is not just a nebulous idea, but an actual reality which has been disclosed in the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ.²

¹Oden, Kerygma and Counseling, 125.

²Ibid., 23-25. It should be evident at this point that Oden is dependent on Barth's doctrine of election of all mankind in Jesus Christ. See Karl Barth, 652.
Oden follows Rudolf Bultmann as far as existential and phenomenological analysis can conceptualize authenticity as an ontological possibility. But Oden could not go along with Bultmann when the latter argued that authenticity as an ontic reality can only be actualized by kerygmatic address.\(^1\) According to Oden, psychotherapy not only conceptualizes, but also actualizes the authentic life. Of course, Oden's argument is based on his Barthian revelational theology by which he argues that effective therapy never occurs without an implicit ontological assumption which involves revelation.\(^2\)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's contribution to Oden's project of relating psychotherapy to theology appears to be very fundamental. Two key points in Bonhoeffer appealed to Oden as having great potential for the dialogue between theology and therapy. The first is what Bonhoeffer called "thinking in two spheres" and the second, the concept of "the incognito Christ."\(^3\) Oden observes that virtually all


\(^2\)See Brummett, 48; also Oden, *Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy*, 115. Oden also argues: "The theological method with which we approach the dialogue between theology and therapy assumes this principle: God's self-disclosure is always related to, but not identical with, historical and interpersonal events" ("Revelation and Psychotherapy," *Continuum* 2 [1964]: 243, n. 15).

attempts to engage Protestant theology with psychotherapy have been infected with the disease that Bonhoeffer called "thinking in two spheres."\(^1\) According to Oden, two-sphere thinking divides reality into two antithetical categories: "sacred/secular, divine/worldly, revelation/reason, grace/nature."\(^2\) The implication of two-sphere thinking for the therapeutic process would be that it occurs outside the realm of grace. This would go counter to Oden’s revelational theology which maintains that God’s self-disclosure is always related to historical and interpersonal events.\(^3\) Oden agrees with Bonhoeffer that "there are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifested in Christ in the reality of the world."\(^4\) Bonhoeffer’s critique of "two-sphere thinking" therefore serves Oden well in his search for the dialogue between theology and therapy.

\(^2\)Oden, "Theology and Therapy, A New Look at Bonhoeffer," 99.
\(^3\)Oden, "Revelation and Psychotherapy," 243.
\(^4\)Oden, "Theology and Therapy," 100. Oden argues further that "to deal with reality is to deal with that reality which has been dealt with by God in Jesus Christ," and concludes with Bonhoeffer that one can never experience "the reality of God without the reality of the world or the reality of the world without the reality of God" (ibid.).
The second concept in Bonhoeffer which Oden found helpful is that of concrete formation, by which Oden understood Bonhoeffer to mean "not our forming of ourselves . . . but instead God's taking form in us, as that form is pre-eminently known in Jesus Christ." This means that in all authentic interpersonal processes Christ is present, although unrecognized and unproclaimed. This is the concept of the incognito Christ. From this insight in Bonhoeffer, Oden could understand that psychotherapy, although a humanistic endeavor, could "embody the reality of Jesus Christ, and . . . take form in and through the unique interrelationship."

Methodological Issues in Early Oden

As pointed out above, Oden's initial interest was to seek a dialogue between theology and psychotherapy. In going about this task, it was inevitable that he would adopt certain theological positions which have implications for theological method, the subject of this dissertation. It is necessary at this point to outline briefly these points of theological method, for the primary reason of providing an angle from which Oden's transition may be assessed.

1 Bonhoeffer, 17-25.
2 Oden, "Theology and Therapy," 104.
3 Brummett, 52.
4 Oden, Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy, 19.
Hermeneutical Issues

A key component of Oden's theological dialogue with psychotherapy is the question of revelation. The rapproachement which Oden sought between theology and therapy could be established only on the basis of a specific concept of revelation. Oden understands revelation in the unique sense of God's self-disclosure of divine forgiving love "which the Christian community understands to have been manifest in history in the events surrounding the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth."\(^1\) The Christ-event as a historical event is pivotal to Oden's concept of revelation. It is from this vantage point that the Christian community makes sense out of other events, for "in this event is declared a meaning which illumines all other meanings, and in this sense is revelation."\(^2\) It is in this respect that Oden says that "faith sees revelation both in nature and history,"\(^3\) although revelation is not synonymous with nature and history.\(^4\)

\(^1\)Oden, "Revelation and Psychotherapy," 240.

\(^2\)Ibid., 240-241.

\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)Ibid. Oden argues as follows: "Since Christian faith is certain that God's judging and gracious Word is continually speaking to man in his present situation, it opposes any interpretation of man which bifurcates history and revelation. It rejects any and all mysticism which would regard revelation as non-historical, any rationalism which would conceive of revelation as an idea without any historical eventfulness" (ibid., 243). Cf. Barth for whom "revelation means the giving of signs" (Karl Barth, CD, vol. II-1, 52). By this Barth means that "God is unveiled by being present in forms, veiling forms, which are different
A corollary to Oden's concept of revelation is the notion that "God's self-disclosure is always related to, but not identical with, historical and interpersonal events."\(^1\) From this perspective, historical events and processes as well as interpersonal events acquire epistemological value.

Oden's concept of revelation has immediate implications for ontology. Already, in seeking to bring theology and therapy into dialogue, Oden had concluded on the basis of his doctrine of revelation that Jesus Christ is the ontological basis for secular healing.\(^2\) Jesus Christ, however, is God's self-disclosure in history. It follows that at this point in Oden's theology, he conceived a fundamental ontological link between God, on the one hand, and history, man, and nature on the other hand. The exact nature of this connection, however, is not elaborated, but its existential nature appears evident.

\(^1\) Oden, "Revelation and Psychotherapy," 243.

\(^2\) Oden, Kerygma and Counseling, 125.
The Theological Task

Earlier on I pointed out that Oden made a distinction between theology and Christian theology, restricting the latter to the task of seeking logical and internal consistency to the Christian faith. It is worth pointing out at this point how this conceptualization of Christian theology fits into Oden's hermeneutical structure.

It is characteristic of Oden's concept of revelation to regard it as grace or a gift,¹ the gift of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Christian faith, according to Oden, has the character of a response to the divine self-disclosure. Oden assumed that God Himself is not the object of theological inquiry, since God is not an object to be investigated.² Therefore, the theological task is an attempt to make intelligible the response of man to God's self-disclosure. In a sense, then, the object of Christian theology is man's response to God's self-disclosure in Christ. The restrictive nature of the task of Christian theology relates directly to the fact that it has to deal with man's response to revelation. According to Oden, "faith can only be understood from its own centre, since it is a response to an event which is only meaningful in the full sense to those who respond to it."³ On the basis of

¹Oden, "Revelation and Psychotherapy," 240.
²Ibid., 241.
³Ibid.
the foregoing, Oden can define the task of Christian theology as seeking "to understand and clarify the view which faith has of its object, namely, the particular idea of God which is peculiar to Christian faith—the idea of God as revealed in Jesus Christ."¹ This appears to explain why Oden chooses to see Christian theology as essentially a self-understanding exercise of the worshipping community.

**Sources for Doing Theology**

Early in Oden's career, he held to the quadrilateral of sources as the appropriate resources for doing Christian theology. He wrote:

My authority for speaking of God therefore is fourfold: Scriptural truth experienced in life, made intelligible and self-consistent through reasoning, and mediated through the historic Christian tradition. All talk about God in the Christian community is called to be responsible to these four criteria. Each exists in responsive dialogue with the alleged self-disclosure of God. None exists wholesomely without the correctives and balancing features of the others. . . . To focus upon one resource so as to exclude the others is to subvert a wholesome theological method.²

Earlier on Oden had provided the reasons for the inclusion of these four criteria into the resources for doing theology. According to Oden, "all four criteria have the character of response to God's self-bestowal" (emphasis mine).³ This observation has important consequences:

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¹Ibid., 242.

²Oden, *The Structure of Awareness*, 87-88.

³Oden, "Revelation and Psychotherapy," 243.
of the four can be separated from the others or "from the revelation which called them forth,"¹ nor can any of them claim "exclusive priority."² It should be noted that the characterization of the four criteria as a "response" to God's self-bestowal reflects a modern, Barthian, non-cognitive view of revelation. Bonhoeffer's critique of "two-sphere thinking" stands in this same tradition.

To conclude this brief discussion on methodological issues in the early Oden, it is significant to note how his concept of revelation impacts almost all the issues that are relevant to questions on theological methodology.

The Later Oden

Although Oden has undergone a radical shift which constitutes "a reversal of consciousness"³ from left-wing Bultmannian to Orthodox theologian, the change was more gradual than abrupt.⁴ Thus, there is necessarily a period of transition which precedes the eventual shift in Oden's approach to theology. This discussion of the later Oden, therefore, examines first the period of transition and subsequently the shift itself.

¹Ibid.
²Ibid.
³Oden's phrase; see After Modernity—What?, 24.
⁴Brummett, 126.
Oden in Transition

From Oden's own account, we may date the beginning of his transition from the late sixties, when according to him the modernity of trying to live out the critical method ended. The terminus of the transition may be conveniently placed in 1979, the year he published his Agenda for Theology. Altogether, the transition period covers approximately a decade, 1968/69-1978/79. It is evident that, at least, during the first half of this decade, Oden continued his dialogue with therapy while at the same time making his way into the Christian classics. Oden remarks, however, that during the mid-seventies his meeting with and study of the ecumenical councils and leading ancient consensual exegetes became a serious matter for him. It is instructive to inquire into the factors that were responsible for Oden's change of direction and approach.

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2 Brummett, 126.
3 Oden's continuing dialogue with therapy is seen in the publication of After Therapy--What?; idem, The Intensive Group Experience: The New Pietism. At the same time Oden points to the early 70s as the time when he finally found his way, upon the insistence of Will Herberg, into the fourth-century treatise by Nemesius "On the Nature of the Human"; see James Wall and David Heim, eds., How My Mind Has Changed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1991), 124.
4 Wall and Heim, 123.
Factors Influencing the Transition

Since Oden's "movement theologian" period coincides significantly with his engagement with therapy, it is not surprising to observe that his change in course would in part come from the field of psychotherapy.

Therapeutic Outcome Studies

As we noted above, Oden's creativity in theology had led him to seek rapprochement between theology and therapy. Part of the reason for doing this was the assumption that secular psychotherapy was effective, and it fell to Oden to uncover what he saw as the implicit christological, ontological assumption underlying effective therapy. A growing number of empirically based studies which demonstrated the apparent ineffectiveness of professional therapy came as a shock to Oden.

The impact of these therapeutic studies on Oden should be assessed from the point of view that psychotherapy for Oden represented a "plausible currency" for speaking of

1These factors are discussed extensively in Brummett (125-144) on whom this section draws significantly in form.

2Oden, Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy, 115.

3See Oden, After Therapy--What?, 171-173, for an account of the impressive studies which led Oden to doubt the effectiveness of professional therapy. See also Thomas C. Oden, Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), where Oden gives an autobiographical background of his dialogue with psychotherapy.
God on the contemporary scene. Thus psychotherapy, for Oden, represented accommodation to modernity par excellence. The negative impact of these outcome studies was to make Oden over into a critic of the popular attempts to engage psychotherapy with theology rather than its accommodationist. Brummett's opinion on the rationale on Oden's part for making this move appears reasonable when he observes that,

perhaps on a cognitive level, Oden reasoned that this new found evidence called into question the intuition he had concerning the ontological interrelatedness of theology and psychology. On an emotive level, perhaps it was due to embarrassment over his previous overpraising of psychotherapy.

Wolhart Pannenberg

Pannenberg's influence on Oden was to move him away from his left-wing neo-orthodoxy. Oden himself acknowledges that as the sixties progressed, he wrote and spoke in defence of both Barth and Bultmann. However, Oden admits to Brummett that Pannenberg's treatment of the resurrection of Jesus as a demonstrable historical event and his

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1See James Schackelford, 47-51.

2Brummett, 136. Oden's critique of psychotherapy included seventeen specific points at which it may benefit from the classical Christian tradition. See, Oden, "Recovering Lost Identity," for Oden's critique and a listing of his recommendations.

3Brummett, 136.

4Oden, Word of Life, 218.
understanding of universal history were the influential elements which moved him away from his Bultmannianism.¹

As early as 1969,² Oden had become aware of the potential usefulness of Pannenberg’s idea of universal history, but it was not until 1972 that he dealt explicitly and more fully with Pannenberg’s influence on his thought.³ In After Therapy—What?, Oden explicitly acknowledges several ways in which Pannenberg has been shaping his way of framing questions. These ways are summarized below.

1. By speaking about universal history as "the arena of theological reflection," Pannenberg takes theology a significant step past existentialism by leading theology in the direction of a new cosmic objectivism and rationalism.

2. Pannenberg led Oden "to rethink and affirm the need for a futuristic eschatology, without denying the impingement of the end time upon the now.

3. Oden finds in Pannenberg a refreshing affirmation of reason in theology with apologetic value. Thus Oden is persuaded with Pannenberg that kerygmatic theology must use alternative language models which are available in the modern world," so that the inner meaning of the whole historical process, which is the real content of theology’s reflection, will be evident to any man who looks at it without bias.

4. Pannenberg presses Oden to a new way of framing the task of theology as concerned fundamentally with the wholeness of history.

¹Brummett, 137.

²See where Oden writes "I see great merit in the proposal of Wolfhart Pannenberg . . . that God’s revelation is expressed in the totality of universal history, the end of which is proleptically anticipated in the resurrection" (Structure of Awareness, 87, n. 6).

³For a complete statement of these several ways in which Pannenberg was an influence in Oden’s thought development, see Oden, After Therapy—What?, 63-66.
5. Pannenberg helped Oden to appreciate the apocalyptic understanding of history as a way of talking about hope.

6. With the use of rigorous historical-critical scholarship, Pannenberg has led to the grasping of a new significance of Jesus' ministry as a prolepsis or anticipation of the end time. Also Pannenberg presses a whole new set of questions about the resurrection, stressing that the resurrection makes little sense without an apocalyptic understanding of history.

7. Pannenberg provided a model of building a systematic theology on the basis of solid biblical exegesis.¹

It should be pointed out that Oden did not buy into Pannenberg's theology uncritically,² nevertheless, in him he saw possibilities, even for a new model for the theology-therapy dialogue.

Will Herberg

Oden makes a significant point in Pastoral Theology that the single most important thing he has learned in theological method is to "take the risk of listening attentively and obediently to the wisdom of the tradition."³ Oden owes this hermeneutical insight to Will Herberg whom he

¹Brummett, 139-140.

²Oden, for instance, argues that Pannenberg's view of the resurrection, as historically demonstrable from the viewpoint of objective, scientific history as a historic fact, may be a needed correction to existentialist tendencies to dehistoricize the resurrection. Yet, in Oden's view, the church's faith does not rest upon the objective historical demonstrability of events (ibid., 64).

describes as a uniquely brilliant individual whose influence on his life and theology was decisive.\textsuperscript{1} Oden writes regarding Herberg:

Several others influenced me profoundly . . . but none more fundamentally than Will Herberg who did more for me intellectually in the six years of our close friendship (1971-1977) than did any other person during that time, by requiring me to ground my thinking in classical sources.\textsuperscript{2}

Oden's own account points to Herberg as the one critical influence in his transition from Bultmannianism to neoconservatism. According to Oden, it was Herberg who forced him to think through, for the first time, what he labels "the strained vulnerabilities\textsuperscript{3}" of liberalism. Oden acknowledges that the trend had begun in him in the late sixties but had not borne much fruit. But he concludes that "by the time Herberg finished with me, I had become skeptical about the entire Bultmannian enterprise.\textsuperscript{4}" In directing Oden to the classic Christian sources, Herberg did for Oden what Reinhold Niebuhr had done for Herberg in his own pilgrimage from Marxism to his Jewish tradition.\textsuperscript{5} Thus Oden's postmodern orthodoxy has its model in Will Herberg.

\textsuperscript{1}Oden, \textit{Word of Life}, 218.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{5}Brummett, 141.
Critical Themes of the Transition

The change in Oden's theological outlook was bound to show up in several of his theological endeavors. Oden informs us that, during the seventies, four main themes served as turning points for him.¹ These themes became the focus of his critiques in the light of his transition from Bultmannianism to neoconservatism. The themes were psychotherapy, pastoral counseling, antinomianism, and modernity. In a way, the critique of modernity is the fundamental critique since the critiques of the other three themes are really an extension of the critique of modernity. I, therefore, give a brief account of the critique of the first three themes and give the bulk of our attention to the critique of modernity.

Psychotherapy

Oden's critique of psychotherapy was a necessary result of its negative evaluation by therapeutic outcome studies; nevertheless, the essence of his critique is sociological. Oden did not contend that all psychotherapy is ineffective. The shift in his thinking was the intuition that the therapeutic agent need not be a professional. The core of his critique of professional psychotherapy was its medical model, the one-to-one pattern as of a "professional"

¹Oden, Pastoral Theology, 15.
and "patient" relationship. Oden's proposal for psychotherapy was a populist approach whereby the therapy process occurs in encounter groups or the intensive group experience. Oden's critique of psychotherapy, therefore, called for a laicization of therapy which reflected his deepening respect for the wisdom and power of communities and traditions.

Pastoral Counseling

Oden's critique of pastoral counseling was especially focused on what he called "a pervasive amnesia toward the past" as evidenced in the works of seven major contemporary writers on pastoral counseling. Oden comes to this conclusion by using a simple methodology that leads him to see the apparent anti-historical bias in pastoral counseling as a twentieth-century phenomenon. In Oden's

1Oden, After Therapy--What?, 4.
3Oden, After Therapy--What, 4.
4Oden, "Recovering Lost Identity," 10.
5Ibid., 11.
6Oden compared a group of 20th-century pastoral writers with another representative group of 19th-century writers. Subsequently, he examined the indices of each writer's major work to determine how many of major patristic and reformation period writers who deemed to constitute the "classical consensus" were cited (ibid., 10-15).
view, this state of affairs is the result of "a serious attempt to correlate pastoral care with the findings, the approaches and the theoretical and clinical resources of modern psychoanalysis and various psychotherapies." ¹

Oden's recommendation for pastoral counseling is to point out seventeen ways in which pastoral counseling would benefit from the classical tradition.²

**Antinomianism**

With the critique of antinomianism, Oden comes close to the fundamental critique of modernity. Oden understands antinomianism in the general sense of cultural trends that are skeptical of received moral norms.³ Antinomianism has an ethic of license and is built on the assumption that guilt is unreal.⁴ From this perspective, antinomianism is at the root of Freud-based psychotherapy and permeates both contemporary society and theology.⁵ The overcoming of antinomianism will require an appreciation of biblical psychology.⁶

¹Ibid., 10.
²Ibid., 15-17.
³Oden, Guilt-Free. Guilt-Free represents Oden's primary critique of antinomianism.
⁴Ibid., 34.
⁵Ibid., 50.
⁶This evaluation is at the core of Oden's Guilt-Free which explores the five critical axioms of biblical psychology: (1) cheap, painless view of freedom from guilt.
Modernity

Oden gives considerable attention to the critique of modernity in his programmatic book, Agenda for Theology (1979) and its revised version, After Modernity--What? (1990). Oden prefaces his critique of modernity by observing that in theology the decision about the assumptions of modernity constitutes a fundamental, fate-laden, consequential decision, although often unnoticed.¹

It is important to Oden that his readers understand clearly the sense in which he uses the term modernity because his theological argument hangs on this.² This calls for a definition of modernity.

There are three steps in Oden’s definition of modernity which he compares to a target of three concentric circles with a bull’s-eye.³ These three circles correspond to his definition of modernity as a Time, a Mentality, and a Malaise.⁴ As a time, it is Oden’s view that modernity is can wreck havoc upon a heedless society, (2) Christianity’s guilt-free Word differs radically from modern counterparts that tend to dodge the rigorous claims of conscience, (3) Christian freedom is not a denial of law or justice but a response to unmerited grace, (4) the capacity for constructive guilt is a normal and necessary correlate of human freedom, (5) God’s reconciling love remains the solid foundation for Christian celebration of freedom from guilt (ibid., 11-12).

¹Oden, After Modernity--What?, 43.
²Ibid., 45.
³Ibid., 46.
⁴Ibid., 45.
clearly definable as a precise two-hundred-year period between 1789 and 1989 (i.e., between the French Revolution and the collapse of Communism).\footnote{Oden, \textit{Two Worlds}, 32.} It is within the bounds of these two centuries that Oden sees the rising of a mentality, an ideological worldview filled with the "humanistic ethics and scientific values and idealistic hopes of the Enlightenment period."\footnote{Ibid.} According to Oden, this worldview has promoted not only the assumptions, values and ideology of the French Enlightenment, but also those of German idealism and British empiricism.\footnote{Ibid.} However, it is Oden’s evaluation that modernity "is a languishing social malady," which as a worldview has been in disarray during the three decades from 1960 to 1990.\footnote{Ibid., 33.}

\textbf{Four Motifs of Decadent Modernity}\footnote{Oden’s characterization (ibid.).}

Oden distinguishes four key motifs of modernity that are all in the process of collapse.

\textbf{Autonomous Individualism}

Autonomous individualism concentrates on the detached individual as a self-sufficient, sovereign self.\footnote{Ibid.}
According to Oden, this is the legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche who "furnished modernity with the sharp knife of a cynical, egoistic critique of all moral striving." Furthermore, it was Nietzsche who flaunted "egoistic self-assertiveness" as the best possible human condition. Autonomous individualism characterizes the last stages of modernity, the period which Oden criticizes the most. The idealization of autonomous individualism leads to an attitude that sees social parenting as alienation. There is no felt need "for the nurture of social continuities or multigenerational moral tradition," since there is a struggle of individual autonomy against social repression.

**Narcissistic Hedonism**

By narcissism Oden means the excessive love of one's comfort and importance, which from historical perspective translates into "modern chauvinism," the view that moderns are better than all previous thinkers. Elsewhere, Oden defines "modern chauvinism" as "the smug assumption that all modern ideas are superior to premodern wisdoms . . . assuming that old=bad, new=better, newest=best."  

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1Ibid., 36.
2Ibid.
4Ibid., 34.
Narcissistic hedonism is also in crisis today as evidenced in recent history of sexuality, loneliness, divorce, and drugs.¹

Reductive Naturalism

With reductive naturalism, Oden is concerned about the view that "reduces all forms of knowledge to laboratory experimentation, empirical observation or quantitative analysis."² As a corollary, reductive naturalism views the entire physical cosmos as uncreated and attributes all causes to natural causes.³ In Oden’s view, it leads to an emaciated and skeletal approach to truth, but as an ideology it is facing a crisis today.⁴

Absolute Moral Relativism

The view that looks upon moral values with relativity, depending on changing human cultures, is moral relativism. In this case, we are dealing with an absolutism because it is a moral relativism that dogmatically asserts that relativism uncritically.⁵ The pernicious effect of absolute moral relativism, in Oden’s view, is that it

¹Oden, Two Worlds, 34.
²Ibid., 35.
⁴Oden, Two Worlds, 35.
⁵Ibid.
"leaves no room to ask about that One in relation to whom all relativities are themselves relative."1 We find evidence of the crisis that this ideology faces in the hospital wards filled with crack babies.2

These four motifs of later-stage modernity constitute its "axial assumptions"3 and with them, Oden’s definition of modernity is complete. Implied in his definition of modernity is his critique which is a judgment on the status of the forces of modernity. For Oden, those with eyes to see have already been through the ideological funeral of the four key assumptions of modernity, "although it may take time to realize just how unresponsive are the corpses." The funeral occurred in 1989, when the key assumptions of modernity began to be questioned.4

General Impact of the Transition

The critique by Oden of the themes outlined above was bound to have an impact on Oden in a very fundamental way. According to Oden, the transition has occasioned a psychological, methodological, and political shift in his scholarly investigation.5

1Ibid.
2Ibid.
3Oden, After Modernity--What?, 50.
4Oden, Two Worlds, 41.
Psychologically, the shift has been from individualistic self-actualization and expression of Freudian, Rogerian, and Nietzschean values to the nurturing of enduring moral habits and covenant community. The implication of this psychological shift for Oden's theological work is significant. It has led him to experience a "wider cross-cultural freedom of inquiry" into the various tonal colors of Christian orthodoxy coming from different voices in different places and at different times. In this, Oden claims that he experiences "a liberation for orthodoxy in the endless flexibility of centred apostolic teaching to meld with different cultural environments while offering anew the eternal word in each new historical setting." Theologically, this is a sense of freedom in theory and practice which is borne out of the varied conceptualizations of Christian orthodoxy in the tradition.

Methodologically, Oden informs us that the shift has been away from "modern culture-bound individuated experience" towards "the shared public texts of Scripture and ecumenical tradition." This is in essence a hermeneutical shift, and again, its impact on Oden's theological work is worth outlining. His questions are now

1Ibid.
2Ibid.
3Ibid.
4Ibid.
shaped by ancient, consensual, classic Christian exegesis of Scripture.¹ No more does he use the biblical text "instrumentally, sporadically and eisegetically" to support his modern ideological commitments. Now he thrives on "patristic and matristic texts and wisdom,"² seeking guidance in Scripture as ecumenically received and consensually exegeted.³ Oden asserts that the return to classical form of religious consciousness is the hope for the modern situation and the practical basis for surviving its "identity-diffusion."⁴

Politically, the shift occasioned by Oden’s critique of modernity, etc., has been away from "trust in regulatory power and rationalistic planning to historical reasoning . . . greater critical trust in the responsible free interplay of . . . ideas."⁵ Oden sees the paradigm of "social planning" (based on the abilities of a single creative person), and theologies based on it, as incorporating an antipopulist assumption that "the actual meshing wills and competing interests of specific people struggling under the concrete limitations of unfolding

¹Ibid., 126.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., 128.
⁵Ibid., 125.
history are less valuable than the rational planner."¹ The
theological significance of this political shift in Oden is
clear, for he observes that a direct opposite of this social
planning paradigm is the implicit theological method of
orthodoxy.²

It is quite evident that for Oden the worldview of
modernity is not an ideological option. Therefore, putting
together the psychological, methodological, and political
shifts in Oden as a result of the transitional impact, what
worldview do they leave Oden with? Oden chooses to call his
new ideological outlook postmodernity.³

**Postmodernity**

It is critical to understand what Oden means by the
word postmodern because its outlook colors everything that
Oden does. At a formal, simplistic level, postmodern
consciousness is defined as the form of consciousness that
follows chronologically on the heels of decadent modernity.⁴
Beyond this, the term has several shades of meanings. At a
preliminary level, Oden warns against making a program out
of futurity since the bulk of postmodern consciousness is
still something in the future. Indeed, Oden believes that

²Ibid.
³Ibid., 71-99.
⁴Oden, *Two Worlds*, 43.
to attach "a fixed trajectory or platform"¹ to postmodernity is to be "still caught up in modern fantasies of determinism and inevitable optimism."²

But what is it beginning to look like? First, Oden tells us what postmodernity is not. Although Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are touted as philosophers of postmodernism,³ Oden insists that he does not mean by postmodernity what these philosophers mean or say about deconstructionism. In Oden’s view, they are ultramodern since they apply the hermeneutic of suspicion to every premise or assertion.⁴ This radical skepticism, which in a sense is reactionary, represents "modernity in its death throes."⁵ Neither does postmodernity amount to antimodernity since "antimodernity makes the egregious error of overestimating the continuing power of modernity."⁶ Modernity, according to Oden, is dead.

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.


⁵Oden, Two Worlds, 42.

⁶Ibid., 55.
From a theological point of view, postmodernism is distinguished from pre-modernism. Oden notes:

It is useful here to make a basic distinction between two types of orthodoxy: pre- and postmodern. Both are schooled in the same Scriptural texts. Both celebrate the same Christ. But one has journeyed through and dwelt in modernity, while the other has not. Postmodern orthodoxy is distinctive not in its essential doctrine but in its historical experience. It has been deeply impacted by modern sociology, physics, psychology, and, more so, by modern history, which premodern orthodoxy has either avoided or by historical accident never had a chance to meet.¹

Additionally, postmodernism is to be distinguished from liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, and fundamentalism. In Oden's view, all three of these theological stances are modern in mind-set: liberalism because it bought into modernity's cardinal assumptions;² neo-orthodoxy because, at least in Bultmann, it sought to demythologize the Christian message so as to put it into categories "acceptable to the modern mind";³ fundamentalism because it determined to establish faith on the basis of objective historical evidence.⁴

Oden's postmodernism is none of the above but something else. In its direction, postmodern consciousness is attuned to "organic changes grounded in particular rooted

¹Oden, After Modernity—What?, 60.
²Ibid., 32-34.
³Ibid., 65.
⁴Ibid., 66-69.
social traditions.\textsuperscript{1} Postmodern consciousness is and will be accommodative of changes, but incrementally, not massive shifts,\textsuperscript{2} nurtured and grounded in traditionally tested values.\textsuperscript{3} Consequently, Oden affirms that "nothing is more characteristic of postmodern consciousness than the willingness to be parented by historical reason and the wisdom of social experience."\textsuperscript{4}

Oden finds the best illustration of postmodern consciousness in the field of postmodern architecture. He talks about how modern architecture, left with a problem of legitimization and plausibility, has ventured into postmodern architecture. It is astonishing how, according to Oden, the variables distinguishing modern and postmodern architecture, as discussed by Charles Jencks, correspond very closely with the transitions currently being experienced in theology. He summarizes these characteristics as follows:\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{1}Oden, \textit{Two Worlds}, 44.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{4}Oden, \textit{After Modernity--What?}, 50.
\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., 73.
Modern Architecture | Postmodern Architecture
---|---
utopian | popular
idealist | pluralist
Zeitgeist | tradition
purist | eclectic
antiornamental | ornamental
antirepresentational | representational
antimetaphor | prometaphor
anti-historical memory | pro-historical memory
antihumor | prohumor
antisymbolic | prosymbolic

The cluster of variables characterizing postmodern architecture, therefore, paints a composite picture of postmodern consciousness.

Postmodern Consciousness in Theology

The central feature of Christian consciousness in the postmodern situation is the rediscovery of the long-ignored texts of classical tradition, especially the Church Fathers of the first five Christian centuries. This is Oden’s foundational premise for doing theology in the postmodern situation. For Christians, Oden implies in this premise that this is a methodological “return to the sacred texts of early Christian Scripture and the exegetical guides of the formative period of its canonization and interpretation.” Of the exegetical guides, Oden mentions four writers from the East (Athanasius, Basil, Gregory

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¹Oden, Two Worlds, 53.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom), and four from the West (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great).¹

What precise use have these texts for Christian theology in the postmodern situation? It is Oden's view that the existence of these texts makes it possible "to engage in a scientific study of all this religious testimony and experience—pressing for objective, fair-minded inquiry."² For Oden, such study does not lead to a disregard of God as the object of inquiry. Rather, it represents the best way to take God seriously, that is, by taking "seriously the historical concretions of consciousness—prayers, sacred texts, liturgies, spiritual disciplines—which have emerged out of the worship of that One."³

Oden's conclusion on the effect of postmodernism on Christian thinking is telling in its implications for theology. He notes:

"There is, of course, no single definitive mode of postmodern thinking, and certainly no singular, unchallenged, universally approved approach to Christian postmodern consciousness. We seek to describe an ecumenical rainbow, not a narrow, monolithic, and fixed entity."⁴

¹Ibid., 54.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
We have noted that the return to long-ignored texts of the Christian tradition, according to Oden, is the central feature of Christian consciousness in the postmodern situation. Obviously, this is a significant methodological move on the part of Oden, which leaves open the question regarding the hermeneutical ramifications of this move with respect to modernity's biblical historical criticism and hermeneutics.

Oden embarks on a critique of criticism. Nevertheless he warns that "postmodern orthodoxy is not just a simplistic, nostalgic return to premodern methods as if modernity never happened." This is because Oden points out clearly that postmodern consciousness takes all the available methods of modern inquiry for granted. Thus, Oden finds nothing wrong with the historical-critical method per se, but only its recent ideological captivity and biased application which he outlines as follows:

Insofar as it pits modern methods of inquiry against all ancient wisdoms, modern critical method displays an egocentric ideological bias against all forms of premodern consciousness. Such truncated criticism is best called not criticism but simply prejudice. It is a reductionist criticism that imports the philosophical assumptions of naturalistic

1For an extended discussion of Oden on this subject see After Modernity--What?, 103-147; idem, Two Worlds, 81-89; see also idem, "After-Modern Evangelical Spirituality: Toward a Neoclassic Critique of Criticism."

2Oden, Two Worlds, 81.

3Ibid.
reductionism as the central feature of the study of Scripture and tradition.¹

Oden is convinced that if critical scholarship could be relieved of its unnecessary excesses it could be of great service in the pruning and ethical deepening of Christian teaching.² He sees modern historical inquiry as especially burdened with limits: the limits of what can be seen; the limits of documentation; and the limits of verification.³ On the limits of what can be seen, Oden believes that it is not enough to search for only phenomena, for history cannot be repeated or objectively tested.⁴ On the limits of documentation, modern historical inquiry needs to be attuned to the passion and social interests of the reporters of texts and cease to "see history from some objective point outside of history."⁵ On the question of verification, Oden makes three points. First, historical inquiry must be humble to admit that only proximate verification, which is dependent on the testimonies of witnesses and evidences of past documents, is possible in the study of history⁶—not absolute verification as in physics, but proximate

¹Oden, After Modernity—What?, 110.
²Ibid., 121.
³Ibid., 122-123.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 123.
⁶Ibid.
verification. Second, historians should not pretend to be behavioral scientists, by admitting only evidence that their philosophical assumptions admit.¹ Finally, the linear, unrevisitable character of history means that "those who admit as historical only those events that correspond by analogy with familiar history (following Troetsch on the law of analogy . . . ) persist in practicing a systematic distortion."² More recently, Oden has extended the limit and pretenses of modern criticism to thirteen points which he subjects to criticism.³

After the Shift . . . What?

In the foregoing discussion, I have attempted to outline Oden's earlier scholarly commitments during the sixties and early seventies and his subsequent transition and shift from those earlier commitments. We have seen that the transition has impacted Oden's approach to theology in a very fundamental way, namely, psychologically, methodologically, and politically. After 1979 when Oden's transition was consummated, most of his works are written from the viewpoint of postmodern consciousness as outlined above. Indeed, Oden's agenda for theology in the last quarter of the twentieth century, in preparation for the

¹Ibid.
²Ibid., 124.
³See Oden, Two Worlds, 83-85.
third millennium, calls for postmodern orthodoxy.¹ This is a clarion call which needs to be taken seriously. But postmodern orthodoxy builds on a theological method which is called variously as Vincentian or Conciliar.² My goal is to understand more carefully Oden’s postmodern orthodoxy via its method. The specific examination of Oden’s method is presented in chapter 4, but before doing so, I need to prepare the theoretical framework by which I will describe and analyze Oden’s method in the next chapter. In chapter 3 I will attempt to develop a formal structure of method through logical analysis of the concept of method.

¹Oden, Agenda for Theology, 30-31.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD IN THEOLOGY

Introduction

In chapter 2, I sought to give an overview of Thomas Oden's background and theological interests with the view of situating us for the analysis of his method which is the subject of this dissertation. Previous discussion has revealed a theologian who has had a wide and deep experience with modernity. Yet, the decade from the late sixties saw him through a period of transition that has left him disenchanted with contemporary liberal theology. Oden's prior deep commitment to liberalism now makes him one of its ardent critics. Chapter 2 revealed an interest on Oden's part to take contemporary theology in a completely new direction. Oden's postmodern orthodoxy intends to give theology a whole new outlook. In the conception of its task and methodological assumptions, postmodern orthodoxy represents a new vision in contemporary theology. Oden's theological agenda is not just another program in the medley of contemporary theological options. It represents, at least in its intentions, a redirection of course for theology.
In the context of contemporary theology, Oden’s agenda represents a radical theological alternative which needs to be understood not only materially (i.e., what it says about the various loci of Christian theology) but formally as well (i.e., the structure of thought which leads him to the theological conclusions he comes to). Indeed, not only Oden’s theology, but all theologies must be understood and clarified in both their material and formal senses.

The need to understand theology formally requires that we put in place a standardized formal structure by which theologies such as Oden’s may be analyzed and compared. In my view, this need necessarily raises the question of method, and it is the goal of this chapter to work out such a formal structure. But before getting to work on the formal structure of method by which theologies may be analyzed and compared, I need to show in what sense the current theological situation raises the question of method. In other words, I wish to answer the question, How is the question of theological method relevant to the contemporary theological scene?

The period beginning from the second quarter of the twentieth century has been characterized by a revival of interest in theology.¹ One of the significantly enduring

¹This assessment may be supported from several fronts. The publication of Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans, Römerbrief (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985) has
issues in this theological ferment has been the question of the foundation of theological knowledge.\(^1\) It seems quite accurate to state that the issue of historical consciousness lies at the root of the changed theological situation.\(^2\)

Indeed, the rise of historical consciousness is credited as having spawned the program of a "mediating theology," whose goal is to serve the "true mediation" between the idea of Christianity and the modern scientific consciousness— that is, to effect the valid reconciliation of historical Christianity and contemporary culture.\(^3\) The launching of

been noted as marking the beginning of a new epoch in theology in the sense that it marked the emergence of a new breed of theologians—Bultmann, Brunner, Heim, Tillich, Torrance, etc. See Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson, eds., Tensions in Contemporary Theology (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 35. Gundry and Johnson mention, in addition to the rise of these theologians, such significant developments as the challenge of the program of religious liberalism, the issue of revelation as the dominating theological topic, and the intense emphasis on biblical theology (ibid., 36-39).

\(^1\) J. Sperna Weiland, New Ways in Theology (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1968), 18-25. Weiland observes that in the changed landscape of twentieth-century manner of thinking, Christian faith no longer conforms to a single image of reality.

\(^2\) Ibid. Weiland mentions that faith has become an orientation in history, an orientation which cannot be made to conform to a single image of reality.

\(^3\) Claude Welch, Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1:269. John P. Clayton distinguishes both the narrow and broad meanings of the word Vermittlungstheologie. In its broader usage, the word captures all theologians who are sympathetic to Schleiermacher's call for a "perpetual alliance" between learning and faith, for whom "the split between a faith unacceptable to culture and a culture unacceptable to faith" is intolerable (The Concept of Correlation: Paul Tillich
the program of a mediating theology was not simply a fad, neither has it been an issue at the fringes of contemporary Christian theology. In fact, Gerhard Ebeling has attested to the central importance of this issue by arguing that theology is essentially a mediation between tradition and the present times.¹ A problem which this effort at mediation presents is the question of method, a basic problem of theology as formulated more generally by Ebeling: "It is the problem of method that in the theological situation today has entered an extremely topical and critical stage."² The writers on theology, who have seen

¹Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 26-41. Ebeling formulates this issue in other words by saying that "the question as to the rightness and limits of theology’s conforming to the times is really the basic problem of the theological situation today" (ibid.). Ebeling defends the setting of theology’s "conforming to the times" at the center of theological discussion by saying that the present dominant tendency in theology, ostensibly theology of mediation, arose as a reaction against a period when the motto of conforming to the times was trumps.

²Ibid., 27. Of course, the methodological problem is the general formulation of a more specific hermeneutical problem which Ebeling himself acknowledges. J. P. Clayton gives a material expression of the hermeneutical problem by the question: "How does one interpret traditional religion in the light of contemporary cultural experience?" (Clayton, 9). It is true that the hermeneutical explorations of Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs represent newer hermeneutical options to the trail blazed by Schleiermacher, through Dilthey and Bultmann in the sense that the former emphasize the hermeneutical import of language while the latter, especially Schleiermacher and Dilthey, stressed psychological hermeneutics. Nevertheless, the historical problem of bridging the temporal and cultural gap between
the exigency created by the hermeneutical situation in contemporary theology, demonstrate an urgent desire to make the Christian faith meaningful and relevant.¹ Theirs is an attempt to demonstrate the manner in which the traditional Christian faith is/can be continuous with contemporary human experience.² The hermeneutical question appears to inform the general direction of contemporary theological methodology.

Nevertheless, the answers provided by these methodologies do not seem to satisfy all the methodological needs of contemporary theology. In the light of other methodological needs of contemporary theology, to be

¹See J. J. Mueller, What Are They Saying About Theological Method (New York: Paulist Press, 1984). Mueller discusses these theological methodologists from the point of view of their philosophical inclinations: Rahner and Lonergan (Transcendental Method); Macquarrie and Tillich (Existential Method); Tracy and Meland (Empirical Method); Schillebeeckx and Sobrino (Socio-Phenomological Method).

²David Tracy, for example, sees the Christian faith as caught in a crisis of meaning and a struggle for an authentic humanity operative in our contemporary period. The crisis of meaning is specifically a crisis of cognitive claims such that a literal interpretation of the Genesis account and a literalistic theory of Scriptural inspiration are no longer options in the light of modern historical study of the Scriptures (David Tracy, The Blessed Rage for Order [New York: Seabury Press, 1975], 4-14).
explained shortly, theological methodology does not have to be programmatic in the sense of satisfying a theology of mediation.¹ The current pluralistic theological situation demands a formal reflection on method as such, with the view to inquiring and investigating into the arguments, positions, and perspectives that the various applied theological methodologies serve to establish and articulate.² This is a methodological need that is quite different from a method of theology aimed at facilitating the mediation between Christian faith and contemporary experience. Method in this sense is viewed as a category, a dimension of human activity which warrants examination as such. In the words of Miller, "the purpose here is neither to find nor frame methods, but rather to clarify the

¹David Tracy is correct in emphasizing the need for each theologian to articulate and defend an explicit method of enquiry, but the theologian should not have to take a self-conscious revisionist attitude as he suggests (ibid., 3).

²The case for such a method has been made in philosophy. See Majorie C. Miller, "Method and System in Justus Buchler and Chu Hsi: A Comparison," Journal of Chinese Philosophy 14 (1987): 209-225. Miller’s argument is quite relevant to theology. The basis of the argument is that every philosopher utilizes method in their work, whether the philosopher is self-consciously articulating the method being utilized or not. It is important, however, to distinguish the method thus utilized from the method which may be explicitly developed and advocated by a philosopher for one or more of several reasons: "either narrowly as a method of engaging in philosophic investigation; more broadly, as a method of inquiry; more broadly still, as a method of solving problems—wherever and whatever problems may be identified" (210).
activity which finds or frames them, and to illustrate the process of methodic activity."

The purpose of this chapter is to try to describe the basic nature and structure of method. What is method? What are the components involved in method? A description and analysis of the basic structure of method will be useful in the description, analysis, and clarification of different theologies and their different strands of arguments and issues. An exercise of this nature will improve legitimacy in theology.

The analysis and description of the basic structure of method is particularly important to the goal of this

\begin{quote}
Ibid. Method in this sense emphasizes its formal consideration. It is a discourse on method, a reflection on the grounds of method as distinguished from its material, concrete application to content. Hence the question arises whether this is a justifiable approach. Doesn't such an approach lead to methodologism? David Tracy already faced this issue and answered that the distinction between method and content leads to a methodologism where the search for a method is separated from a search for truth (Tracy, \textit{Blessed Rage for Order}, 11). See Terrence Reynolds, "Method Divorced from Content in Theology? An Assessment of Lonergan's Method in Theology," \textit{Thomist} 55 (1991): 245-269, for a summary discussion of this problem as raised in the methodology of Bernard Lonergan. It is hard to argue that Lonergan's method is divorced from content as such, although the criticism may be justified in that the basic development of his method is divorced from theological content.

Randall L. Maddox, \textit{Toward an Ecumenical Fundamental Theology} (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), discusses the question of legitimacy in theology in the context of fundamental theology. The primary concern over this question is that of facilitating the exercise of theological reflection. Thus, the scientific requirement of objective argumentation represents an effort to help theology to proceed in an appropriate manner.
\end{quote}
dissertation, which is to analyze and evaluate Thomas Oden's Vincentian method as an appropriate and adequate response to the pluralistic situation in contemporary theology. It is impossible to evaluate any method, including Oden's, adequately without a clear and thorough analysis of the inner structure of the method. Only such an analysis will expose the inner strengths or weaknesses of the method with respect to its adequacy to do what it purports to do. The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to provide us with that basic structure of method, which will enable us to uncover the inner workings of Oden's method so as to be able to assess its adequacy in meeting the contemporary pluralistic challenge in evangelical theology.

Method in General: Nature and Conditional Structure

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Analogical Imagination represents a systematic description and analysis of the fundamental problem of intersubjective theological meaning. In Tracy's view, the contemporary theological challenge is that of "explicitness." Theologians should make explicit the arguments, positions, and perspectives of their theological conclusions.

Theology as an intellectual enterprise proceeds with a method whether explicitly or implicitly. This observation arises from the simple fact that theology is an activity, and it seems impossible to conceive of many activities without a method or a way of doing things. The quest for explicitness and intersubjective theological meaning, therefore, becomes a fundamental theological question of making theology's method explicit. Theological method

society, academy, and church (3-46).

1According to Tracy, one primary focus for contemporary hermeneutical concerns "is an explicit recognition of the theologian's responsibility for authentically public discourse" (Analogical Imagination, 29). In Tracy's own appraisal, this question involves not only identification of the three publics, of society, academy, and church, but the development of criteria of adequacy "which cross the permeable boundaries of all three publics" (ibid.).

2The word method comes from the Greek meta (with, in) and hodos (way). Thus S. T. Coleridge suggests that the primary signification of the word method from its Greek roots is "a progressive transition from one step in any course to another" (S. T. Coleridge's Treatise on Method, ed. Alice D. Snyder [London: Constable and Co., 1934], 2).

3Making theological method explicit is the goal of theoretical reflection on method. As Fernando Canale observes, "reflection on method . . . produces a discourse containing the formula of the activities required to reach a
conditions theological conclusions; but on what pivot(s) does theological method itself turn? This question goes behind the realm of theological method as applied to concrete content and addresses the formal question of the structure of method as a philosophical category. What are the components/structures of method in general (formal) that condition and frame specific instances of method applied to concrete content (material)? The path to explicitness in theological method begins with the analysis and clarification of the structure and components of method as a dimension of human activity.

How does one go about delineating the conditional structure and components of method as a concept? In my view, such a goal is achievable through an analysis of the logical presuppositions of method as a category.\(^1\) By logical presuppositions, I mean that which must be presupposed in the conception of method without which the experience of given goal. Discourse on method makes method public" (Fernando L. Canale, "Interdisciplinary Method in Christian Theology? In Search of a Working Proposal," Unpublished Ms, 1997, 5).

\(^1\)The possibility of deducing the structural conditions of method from Aristotle's four causes of movement has been explored by Fernando L. Canale (ibid.). Beginning with the premise that method is basically an activity, Canale makes the following correspondences/components of method: efficient cause = method; material cause = data; formal cause = hermeneutical principles; final cause = goal.
method is an impossibility. Such analysis of the concept of method will yield components that will serve as the formal moments of methodic argumentation. These formal moments may in turn be materially interpreted to create differing methodologies for different sciences or to establish different methodologies within a particular science.

In the following analysis, I wish to utilize Justus Buchler's analysis on method as our starting point. My

1See Anders Nygren, Meaning and Method in Philosophy and Theology: Prolegomena to a Scientific Study of Religion, trans. by P. S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 187-225, for a complete exposition of the concept of presupposition and the logical analysis of presuppositions. To summarize, the logical analysis of presuppositions as a philosophical exercise works its way from a given experience to its logical presuppositions. It has the task of examining critically the first principles of that experience. This is what makes the principles so derived characteristically scientific and unmetaphysical since they are anchored in experience and hence may be critically tested. Nygren clarifies the logical structure of presuppositional analysis by saying that "the idea of implication is one that immediately comes to mind when one seeks to determine the logical structure of presuppositional analysis" (220). Nygren makes the important distinction, however, that the idea of implication and hence deduction that is involved in presuppositional analysis moves in a direction opposite the usual one. Hence in presuppositional analysis, "the question here is not how particular propositions or theorem are implied in general axioms, but instead how general presuppositions are implied in particular empirical propositions" (ibid.).

2Justus Buchler, The Concept of Method (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). The eminence of Justus Buchler as a scholar and contemporary American philosopher is attested in Beth Singer, Ordinal Naturalism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Justus Buchler (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 11-12. See also Majorie Miller, "Method and System in Justus Buchler and Chu Hsi." In the various writings of Buchler, he has utilized his own

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dependence on Buchler is based on the following reasoning. Although Buchler's concept of method is based in experience, he does not provide any particular interpretation of method as such.\(^1\) The proposition on method which will form the basis of my analysis of the formal components of method is succinctly stated by Buchler as follows:

A method is a power of manipulating natural complexes, purposively and recognisably, within a reproducible order of utterance; and methodic activity is the translation of such a power into the pursuit of an end—an end implied by the reproduction.\(^2\)

A brief exposition of Buchler's categories and some aspects of his philosophy will make his proposition on method more understandable.

An appropriate place to begin is Buchler's conception of human activity and functioning as a process. He begins by stating that the question whether the human individual is best understood as a multiplicity or as a categories, like Alfred North Whitehead, to provide an analysis of experience and judgment, meaning and method, art, science and philosophy.

\(^{1}\)See footnote 1 above.

\(^{2}\)Buchler, *Concept of Method*, 135. Obviously, Buchler is not the first or only scholar to express himself on the question of method. Among significant extant treatises on method, the following may be recognized: Rene Descartes, *Discourses on Method* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1960); Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 1-77; Coleridge, S. T. Coleridge's *Treatise on Method*. Buchler examines these works as well as the ideas on method expressed by such philosophers as M. R. Cohen, John Dewey, Francis Bacon, Jeremy Bertham, John Locke, and A. N. Whitehead in *Concept of Method*. 

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unity is unprofitable. This is because the humanity of the individual implies a plurality of functions, and the individuality of men or women implies a focus of movement and of utterance.¹ Buchler argues further that if the view that individuality implies unity has any meaning at all, then the individual functions in a unitary way, implying that each activity or mode of activity is a phase of a single process.² Buchler uses his category of proception to define the interplay of the human individual's activities and dimensions and their unitary direction.³ He expresses the significance of the concept as follows: "The term is designed to suggest a moving union of seeking and receiving, of forward propulsion and patient absorption. Proception is the composite, directed activity of the individual."⁴ Thus any instance of the individual's functionings or any event in his history enters into the proceptive direction. To sum


²Ibid.

³Ibid., 4.

⁴Ibid. Buchler explains the need for the new term by saying that the use of such traditional philosophical concepts as "self," "character," "organism," "personality" lack the comprehensiveness to be able to function as vehicles of a philosophy of communication, method, and reason (3).
up, "proception is the process in which a man's whole self is summed up or represented."¹

For Buchler, there are two fundamental and correlative dimensions in the proceptive direction: manipulation and assimilation.² These two dimensions represent the exhaustive ways in which man's being realizes itself. In assimilation, man receives the impact of all that is related to it, while in manipulation he impacts on all that is available to it.³

It is necessary at this point to explain Buchler's use of the category "utterance." In the manipulative dimension, Buchler distinguishes three essential functions of man—statement, contrivance, and action.⁴ These correspond to three modes of human production, namely, saying, making and doing, which according to Buchler are also three modes of judgments, designated respectively as assertive, exhibitive, and active.⁵ Buchler explains that

¹Ibid., 5. For a discussion on the relationship between Buchler's proception and traditional concepts and ideas such as experience, individual transcendence, and intending see pp. 11-16.

²Ibid., 17.

³Buchler, Concept of Method, 89.

⁴Ibid., 94.

⁵Justus Buchler, Nature and Judgment (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 20. Buchler explains that "when questions of truth or falsity or probability, or, in general, questions of evidential status, are asked about a product, that product is being used as an assertive judgment" (ibid., 22). Similarly, "an active judgment may
each of these functions of man "yields a genus of products," and the "products that are necessarily the instances of one or more of these genera comprise the extent of human utterance."

Method emerges from man's efforts to limit and increase his world in some respects. In Buchler's words, "method reflects man's response to an overabundant yield from his own functions," it is "the constellation of factors within utterance which permits utterance to detect its own possibilities."

Given the preceding background to Buchler's terminologies and categories, we may now proceed with the logical analysis of the conditions implied in his proposition on method.

Natural Complexes of Method as Data

The first significant implication of Buchler's proposition is that natural complexes are the material be identified by the fact that it is subject to the application of moral predicates," while exhibitive judgment involves the rearrangement, shaping or molding of materials (ibid., 24, 28). Cf. Anders Nygren's contexts of meaning, namely, science, ethics, aesthetics, and religious (Nygren, 273-278).

'Buchler, Concept of Method, 94.

'ibid., 91.

'ibid., 93.

'ibid., 95.
condition of possibility for method. There is no method without natural complexes.\(^1\) A natural complex is Buchler’s terminology for whatever is, in whatever way. Thus, the term cuts across all the modes of human production to include signs, principles, sensory data, ideas, objects, relations, fictions, functions, etc.\(^2\)

Buchler’s use of the term natural complex to describe the material of method has other implications. He uses the word "complex" coextensively with another word, "order," which is best interpreted as "an organized multiplicity."\(^3\) A natural complex, therefore, connotes relatedness since in Buchler’s system every complex is constituted by others and plays a role in the constitution of others.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Nygren takes up the issue of the relationship between material and method. He parodies Kant to say that "material without method is blind, method without material is empty." Nygren explains that "it is in order to handle the material that one develops the method. Apart from this the method would not exist" (Nygren, 3-4). See Coleridge, who argues that method arises when the mind rouses itself to contemplate things and their relations. Rene Descartes’ Rule V for the Direction of the Mind reflects the same sentiment: "Method consists entirely in the order and disposition of the objects toward which our mental vision must be directed if we would find out any truth" (Coleridge, 3). See Haldane and Ross, 9.

\(^2\) Buchler, *Concept of Method*, 137.

\(^3\) Singer, 22.

\(^4\) Ibid. On the question of things and the contemplation of their relations as an indispensable condition of method, see Coleridge, 1-10. In Coleridge’s words, "the relations of things form the prime objects, or, so to speak, the materials of method; and that the..."
From the brief analysis of method as manipulation of natural complexes, we may draw the following conclusion as constituting an important moment in method's structure. Method necessarily implies things, materials, data, and their relations. Thus, a significant moment in any reflection on methodic activity is to explicate the relevant and legitimate data in the activity in question and the relationships in the data enumerated. The use of the phrase "relevant and legitimate data" is intentional. It is used to point out the fact that data for any methodic activity must be shown to be organically or structurally related to the activity in question. Natural complexes are the proper data for methodic manipulation in Buchler's definition because natural complexes in his system arise out of human utterance. Thus natural complexes as data for human methodic activity are legitimate.

The significance of this moment of method's structure in theological analysis and construction may be noted as follows. Legitimacy in theological analysis and construction, from a methodological point of view, requires first that theologians make explicit the sources of their theological activity. What is required here is not a mere listing of sources or data. Legitimate data requires that the theologian shows how the sound sources may be reasonably contemplated of those relations is the indispensable condition of thinking methodically" (3).
admitted as data for theological reflection. Since theology's proper object of reflection is God and His revelation, it seems to me that the requirement for legitimate data translates into showing how one's sources are connected to revelation, however revelation is conceived. Second, the theologian should show how the individual sources are related, as for example, in a pattern or framework of authority.¹

**Purposiveness of Method as Goal**

The purposive character of method is a natural consequence of Buchler's understanding of the manipulative dimension of the human process. The methodic impulse, according to Buchler, springs from zest, prodigality, and need. Thus he maintains that methods are directed by actual

¹Maddox, *Toward an Ecumenical Fundamental Theology*, 109-112, comes to similar conclusions after researching the writings of theologians who are concerned to establish legitimacy in theology. Maddox concludes that to bring legitimacy in theology, a theological grounding discipline such as fundamental theology must "reflect upon the means by which theology executes its judgments concerning the legitimacy of particular theological formulations. This reflection must deal with two basic problems: 1) the criteria of theological argument, and 2) the structure of theological argument" (iii). On the criteria of theological argument, Maddox refers to the sources of theology—Scripture, dogma, ecclesial teaching office, etc. For structure of theological argument, Maddox draws attention to the need to show how the criteria are actually used in argumentation (109-112).
aims.\textsuperscript{1} Buchler expounds on the relationship between method and aim. Referring to the consciously manipulative man he observes:

He develops methods also for the appeasement of pre-existent aims. These methods preserve the aims which provoked them. . . . New aims breed new methods, but the methods bred render the aims more definite and less novel. . . . Methods, then, are modes of being which preserve and universalize the needs, wants, hopes, whims, and ideals of man.\textsuperscript{2}

The purposive nature of method is also implied in Buchler's use of the term "reproducible."\textsuperscript{3} He explains that an order of utterance, being itself an order of existence, is related to other orders to existence, i.e., "methodic activity does not choose its complexes \textit{ex nihilo}."\textsuperscript{4} In choosing its complexes, method exercises an anticipatory power which reproduces a structure and direction for utterance. Thus, the order reproduced "presupposes . . . a power relevant to a specific kind of complex that may be."\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{1}Buchler, \textit{Concept of Method}, 90. Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, for whom method has its beginnings as "a dodge facilitating the accomplishment of some nascent urge of life" (\textit{The Function of Reason} [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1929], 18).

\textsuperscript{2}Buchler, \textit{Concept of Method}, 110.

\textsuperscript{3}Reproducibility is essential to method's structure. "In so far as an order is not reproducible, one cannot discuss methodic activity" (Miller, 213).

\textsuperscript{4}Buchler, \textit{Concept of Method}, 139.

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid.
Hence Buchler can say that "there is always a generically recognizable end that belongs to a given method."¹

From the brief discussion under this section, I am ready to draw another conclusion as constituting a second important moment in method’s conditional structure. Method necessarily implies a goal in view. Method as a category implies an end, while methodic activity implies an end actually pursued. Therefore, it is essential to any methodic activity to be able to clarify and make explicit the goal implied in it.

Once more, the relevance of this moment in method’s structure to theological analysis and construction may be noted. Put simply, legitimacy in the theological enterprise, from a methodological point of view, requires reflecting on the goal of that enterprise. The notion of goal, however, carries with it the idea of effort or task which makes the goal achievable. A goal is distinguishable from the activity that leads to the achievement of the goal. Thus, a boxer’s goal of winning a match may be achieved through different activities.² Activity is an essential part of method which is conditioned by goal among other factors. Bernard Lonergan was speaking more to the activity aspect of method when he defined it as "a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and

¹Ibid., 138.
²Ibid., 107.
progressive results." The distinction between goal and task is perhaps best made in terms of Aristotle's causes. In this case, the goal is the final cause, that "for the sake of which a thing is," while the task is the efficient cause, "the maker, a cause of the thing made and the change-producing of the change."

Method in theology, from this perspective, requires reflecting on both the goal and task of theology. Thus it is not enough for one to say, for instance, that one's goal of theology is to present what Christians have always believed. It is equally important to show, technically, the activity by which one arrives at the stated goal. This requirement, in itself, facilitates the process of intersubjective meaning and publicness in theology. The affinity of this moment in method's structure to the previous one should be noted. Insofar as the first moment provides the material which is manipulated and directed toward the achievement of the goal, the first moment becomes

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1Lonergan, Method in Theology, 5.


3Ibid., 1013a, 31-32.

4Maddox notes that the issue of theology's goal brings to the fore the relation of faith and theology. Implied in this relation are the following pertinent questions: "Does theology merely explicate faith? Does it engage in critical reflection on faith? Or again does it try to ground faith?" (Toward an Ecumenical Fundamental Theology, 104).
constitutive of the second. Hence one's selection and use of sources in theology is directly related to the conception of theology's goal.

"Order of Utterance" of Method as Presuppositions

In Buchler's proposition on method, the manipulation of natural complexes occurs "within a reproducible order of utterance." An order of utterance refers to a distinguishable complex in the "proceptive direction." Thus it is a complex which has been characteristically unified by virtue of the "pattern of relatedness among its components." The pattern of relatedness of the components of the order defines and delimits it. Therefore, the only limit set on the power of method is the reproducibility of a particular order of utterance.

Buchler uses the term perspective to describe the order of utterance. "By an order to utterance we intend a perspective of utterance." To show the definite character

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1Singer, 22.

2Notice that orders of utterance may be subject to aesthetic, moral or evidential evaluation. See Miller, 212. Again, cf. Anders Nygren's discussion on the autonomy of context of meanings. Nygren maintains that "in its presuppositions each context of meaning possesses the laws that must be observed within its own particular province" (276). Thus, science must be judged scientifically, the ethical must be ethically judged, the aesthetic must be aesthetically judged and the religious must be religiously judged.

3Buchler, Concept of Method, 137.
of the order of utterance Buchler states that "a perspective within which utterance occurs is a structure of conditions under which men produce."¹ The hermeneutical conditions under which men produce, therefore, becomes a third significant condition in method's structure.

The application of this condition of method to any cognitive enterprise, such as theology, points to the defining and delimiting hermeneutical presuppositions under which men produce cognitively. The fact that men produce cognitively, under defining hermeneutical conditions, is now generally attested. In describing what Cornelius Van Til has called the modern principle, David A. Powlison writes, "It has become a truism in Western philosophy and philosophy of science that presuppositions exert a pervasive effect on data perception, theory formulation and behavioral or technological consequences."² Obviously, a discussion on the hermeneutical conditions of human cognitive activity entails an exposition of the theory of knowledge.

Furthermore, the understanding of cognition theory appears

¹Ibid., 138.

to be even more relevant in the context of theological activity. Since theology is an intellectual and reflective activity, it is essentially a cognitive enterprise.¹

So far, this discussion on the structural conditions of method in general (i.e., formal components) reveals that method includes data (material), goal (subject-matter), and presuppositions (hermeneutical principles). The application of these formal, structural conditions of method to any methodic activity requires an explicit consideration of the relations of data, goal, and presuppositions within that activity. Therefore, since theology is a reflective activity, the application of the various conditions of method to theology is necessarily an understanding of the relations of data, goal, and presuppositions within the area/activity of cognition. In other words, such application of method in theology seeks to know how knowledge in theology comes about with regard to the relative roles of theology’s data, goal, and its hermeneutical presuppositions. A complete and satisfactory answer to this question requires that one relate, as a first step, the general conditions of method outlined above to the general theory of knowledge. Therefore, the need arises for a brief phenomenological analysis of knowledge.

Presuppositions in Method at the Cognitive Level

We may begin this analysis of the theory of knowledge with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Immanuel Kant's theory of cognition shows that knowledge results from the united operation of intuitions (from sensible objects) and conceptions (creations of the mind).\(^1\) Conceptions, according to Kant, depend upon "functions," by which he means "the unity of the act arranging diverse representatives under one common representation."\(^2\) At a secondary level, Kant shows that the conjunction of the manifold content of representations given us in intuition is originated by the subject as a purely spontaneous act.\(^3\) The concept of conjunction, however, is a notion which encompasses not only the conception of the

\(^1\)Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1959), 62. "Our knowledge springs from two main sources in the mind, the first of which is the faculty or power of receiving representations (receptivity for impressions); the second is the power of cognizing by means of these representations (spontaneity in the production of conceptions)" (ibid.).

\(^2\)Ibid., 72. It is significant to note that according to Kant, a conception never relates immediately to an object, hence a judgment is the mediate cognition of an object, "consequently the representation of a representation of it" (73).

\(^3\)Kant explains that while the manifold content in our representations can be given in a sensuous intuition, the conjunction of synthesis of a manifold intuition can never be given us by the senses. According to him, "of all mental notions, that of conjunction is the only one which cannot be given through objects, but it can be originated only by the subject itself, because it is an act of its purely spontaneous activity" (93).
manifold and the synthesis of it, but also, the unity of the manifold. Kant explains, however, that this unity is "a priori" and precedes all conceptions of conjunction. Consequently, the ground of the unity of diverse conceptions in judgments, "the ground . . . of the possibility of the existence of understanding," must be sought at a higher level. Kant calls this unity the "synthetical unity of apperception," apperception simply meaning consciousness.

This brief outline of Kant's cognition theory is intended to show the constitutive role of reason in the construction of meaning. The methodological relevance of Kant's theory is spelled out under his transcendental doctrine of method. Kant uses the term "architectonic" to designate "the doctrine of the scientific in cognition."

For Kant, method implies a system, by which he means "the

"Conjunction is the representation of the synthetical unity of the manifold" (ibid.).

According to Kant this unity is not the "category" of unity since all the categories "are based upon logical functions of judgment, and in these functions we already have conjunction . . . . It is therefore evident that the category of unity presupposes conjunction" (ibid.).

"By the term Architectonic I mean the art of constructing a system. Without systematic unity, our knowledge cannot become science; it will be an aggregate, and not a system. Thus Architectonic is the doctrine of the scientific in cognition, and therefore necessarily forms part of our Methodology" (ibid.).
unity of various cognitions under one idea." This idea, also called the scientific idea, is itself a conception given by reason. It is the conception of the form of a whole which imparts unity to the parts of the system.\(^1\) Kant sets up a system of these conceptions which, as transcendental ideas, "determine the use of the understanding in the totality of experience according to principles."\(^2\) Transcendental ideas in Kant's cognition theory, therefore, as "a priori" conceptions, point to a conditioning element in the knowing process.\(^3\) They are of the nature of presuppositions which provide the necessary conditions of all knowledge.

In seeking to know the conditions under which men produce cognitively, we have been led by Kant's cognitional analysis to the primary importance of presuppositions. This idea of presuppositions is capable of further elucidation. The ambiguous nature of the term

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\(^1\)As a conception of a form of the whole the idea is given a priori and "determines . . . not only the limits of its contents, but the place which each of its parts is to occupy" (ibid.).

\(^2\)Ibid., 223. See p. 230 for a 3-level classification of all transcendental ideas.

\(^3\)Canale observes that "Kant's explanation of the a priori of reason, leaving aside its transcendentalism and idealism, is very useful and even foundational from the perspective of the epistemological framework for understanding conditionality as part of reason's structure" (emphasis mine) (See Fernando L. Canale, A Criticism of Theological Reason [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987], 53, n. 1).
"presupposition" has been noticed. In the present context, its use is being tied to the realm of cognition from the point of view of a knowing subject. In this context, the idea of presupposition may be further elucidated by showing more systematically how presuppositions adhere to the component parts of reason's structure. Knowledge of the components of reason's structure will help clarify the dynamics of the operation of presuppositions in the constitution of meaning.

Nicolai Hartmann's phenomenological analysis of the experience of knowledge represents a standard treatment of the subject. The basic structure of knowledge, according


2Canale uses presupposition in a similar sense, (Time and Timelessness, 57). Karl Jaspers attaches presupposition to cognition in a similar manner when he observes that "reason attains, by thinking, to its own presupposition, which is an indispensable part of its own completeness" (Karl Jaspers, The Great Philosophers: The Foundations [New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962], 311).

3For a similar analysis on how presuppositions work as part of reason's structure from the point of view of linguistics, see W. D. Hudson, "Language--Games and Presuppositions," Philosophy 53 (1978): 94-99. See also Canale, Time and Timelessness 60, n. 1.

4Nicolai Hartmann, Les principes d'une metaphysique de la connaissance (Paris: Aubier, 1945). See especially vol. 1, chap. 5. My interest in the subject is motivated by the desire to know the components of reason structure in order to be able to distinguish the levels where presuppositions reside and function. This is in furtherance of the need to know more fully the conditions under which
to Hartmann, is a face-to-face opposition of a "knower" and a "known," i.e., a subject and object. The relation is an intimate one, and it is of the nature of a correlation. In the relation, the object communicates its properties into the subject while the subject's role consists in grasping the object. The grasping of the object by the subject which is described as a process of reaching forth (une sortie du sujet hors de sa propre sphère et comme une incursion dans la sphère de l'objet) is also characterized as a "spontaneity of the subject."

Corresponding to the structural relation between the subject and object we find what Canale describes as epistemological and ontological "frameworks." Just as in the respective roles of the subject and object, the men produce cognitively as a moment of method's structure.

1Ibid., 1.5.a.1.
2Ibid., 1.5.a.2.
3Ibid., 1.5.a.4.
4Ibid., 1.5.a.5.

5Ibid., 1.5.c.6. Hartmann uses the idea of spontaneity to show that while the subject is the receptive pole, it is not necessarily passive. Canale points out that the spontaneity of the subject represents an interpretive endeavor in the subject's grasping of the object (Time and Timelessness, 31).

6"Framework" is used by Canale to describe both the epistemological order which leans mostly to the subject's side, and an ontological order which leans to the side of the object in their respective roles in the constitution of meaning (Time and Timelessness, 31).
epistemological and ontological frameworks stand in a close interrelationship in the constitution of meaning. What is important for our purposes is that the phenomenological analysis of reason's structure shows these two frameworks as being a constitutive part of reason's structure.¹

So far, the brief overview of reason structure reveals from both the subject and object epistemological and ontological frameworks as being basic components of reason's structure. The relationship between the two frameworks, however, provides the basis for a third component, namely, system. The unity of meaning which is brought about in the relation between the epistemological and ontological frameworks is what is known as system.² From a formal point

¹For a concise treatment of the nature, role, and relative significance of each of these frameworks, see Canale, Time and Timelessness, 33-43.

²Ibid., 44. System here is synonymous with Kant's idea of system which in Kantian terms is expressed as "the unity of various cognitions under one idea" (Kant, 471). Buchler raised the question regarding the relation between method and system. He shows that the two terms are not interchangeable, but that system names specific traits that may be found within the general span of the methodic process. These traits are of three kinds, depending on whether the primary subject of consideration is (a) the typical operations that lead to (or that actually constitute) a product, (b) the way in which a certain product is made to disclose itself, or (c) the way in which different products are made to relate to one another (Buchler, Concept of Method, 118). Cognitive products in general belong to the second group. For these, system implies "fluent sequentiality" and "flow of reflection" (ibid., 119).
of view, then, system may be seen as a component of reason's structure.¹

This short presentation on reason's structure leads to the conclusion that it comprises three main components: epistemology, ontology, and system. The elucidation that we sought to achieve with respect to how hermeneutical presuppositions work as part of method's structure may now be stated as follows: hermeneutical presuppositions work in method's structure at the levels of epistemology, ontology, and system (i.e., articulatio).

We have finally arrived at the point in this discussion where one may state more fully the relevance of the third moment in method's structure in theological analysis and construction. How does the "conditions under which men produce," which I have shown implies "presuppositions" in cognitive activity, relate to theological method of analysis and construction? It is simply that method in theology, from the perspective of the third component in method's structure, requires an account and reflection on presuppositions from the perspective of epistemology, ontology, and system.

Contemporary discussion on epistemology, however, necessarily involves issues of hermeneutics. Such discussions intend to illuminate the knowing process beyond

¹See Canale for a distinction between system as a formal structure of reason's procedure and system as an actuality (Time and Timelessness, 46).
the basic subject-object lines which seem to be the focus of this discussion so far. Hence epistemology, as a presuppositional condition of method's structure, brings to the fore matters of hermeneutics as relevant to the method question. Presently, we will examine briefly the relevance of hermeneutics to this discussion on method.

Epistemology as Hermeneutics?¹

There is a sense in which it could be argued that both epistemology and hermeneutics overlap their disciplinary concerns since they are both related to issues of knowledge. Nevertheless, hermeneutic philosophers, following the lead of T. G. Droysen, through Wilhelm Dilthey,² have tended to distinguish the phenomenon of "explanation" (erklären) and the phenomenon of "understanding" (verstehen).³ The basic distinction between

¹This subheading carries a question mark to reflect the reality that "after Schleiermacher, hermeneutics became an epistemological and theoretical and no longer a merely methodological and practical endeavor" (Roy J. Howard, Three Faces of Hermeneutics [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982], 10-11). On the distinction between the prior status hermeneutics as a regional discipline and its present status as a general philosophical discipline, see Richard E. Palmer, "Hermeneutics and Methodology," Continuum 7 (1969): 153-158.

²See Howard, 14.

³It is argued that the phenomenon of explanation is appropriate to the natural sciences while the phenomenon of understanding is appropriate to the human sciences. See Randy L. Maddox, "Hermeneutic Philosophy and Theological Studies," Religious Studies 21, no. 4 (1985): 518.
these two concepts represents the tension between classical epistemology (Kantian) and hermeneutics. Hence the two essential problems which hermeneutic philosophers have with traditional epistemology are, first, the former’s reduction of the entire cognitive process to the model of the natural sciences, and second, its ahistorical conception of the knower as one who stands outside of that which is known.¹

Contemporary hermeneutics, therefore, is characterized by a broadening of horizons to include the totality of a text’s life world (erlebnis).²

¹Ibid., 517. The hermeneutic philosophers’ critique of traditional epistemology is based on the insight, developed since Schleiermacher, that central to hermeneutics is the question: "How do we understand something as the thing which it is?" See Anthony C. Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 209. This question has the effect of placing hermeneutics in the context of theories of knowledge, especially knowledge as it pertains to the human sciences. In this realm the issue is understanding while the natural sciences undertake explanation. Understanding, according to Schleiermacher, involves both grammatical and psychological hermeneutics. "Psychological interpretation," according to Schleiermacher, "seeks to give rise to the entire train of thought" (F. D. E. Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts, ed. H. Kimmerle [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977], 223). The psychological moment (also divination) is complemented by the grammatical (also comparative moment). Thus, Thiselton concludes by observing that "to divine without comparative philological or critical study is to become a hermeneutical 'nebulist'; to engage in philological questions without a living, intuitive perception of the spirit of the subject matter and its author is to remain a hermeneutical pedant" (Thiselton, 222). Schleiermacher’s emphasis on capturing the life circumstances of the author in hermeneutics has received varied refinement and reconceptualization in Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas.

²See Howard, 16.
To say that contemporary hermeneutics involves the totality of a text’s or author’s life contexts is to give a simplified view of the hermeneutic situation. The question regarding the essence or key to intersubjective meaning distinguishes different strands of hermeneutic traditions. Roy J. Howard’s *Three Faces of Hermeneutics*¹ presents an introduction to different theories of understanding as they relate to meaning. Howard distinguishes the three main hermeneutic traditions to be analytic, psychosocial, and ontological.² Similarly, Josef Bleicher has identified

¹Ibid.

²According to Howard, analytic hermeneutics follows the lead of Frege in discovering within language the "capacity of characterising the relationship of all properties and objects in the universe." Howard continues, "To see the universe in terms of the articulation of this language was to have in effect an analysis of reality and therefore to have to some degree an analysis of the conditions of truth" (ibid., 35-37). Howard explains that this style of philosophizing begins with the acceptance of some bit or expression of knowledge or of some mental attitude as a given for discussion. Out of this given, one tries to "expose the conceptual map that permeates this universe, hoping to reveal the otherwise hidden logical lines of force" (ibid.). Thus analytic hermeneutics indicates a "preference for formal or logicist ways of elucidating the problems of intersubjective understanding" (ibid., 38). Howard notes that the seminal work of Wittgenstein lies behind most of the contemporary ways of analytic hermeneutics.

Psychosocial hermeneutics, however, differs from analytic hermeneutics in that while the latter asks of a bit of knowledge or mental attitude its logical pattern, the former asks of it a genetic question, namely, "How did this given come about?" or "What are the conditions necessary for its appearance?" Psychosocial hermeneutic, therefore, is critical in a Kantian sense. Thus, while analytic hermeneutics proceeds from a *status quo*, psychosocial hermeneutics look for "a ground, something transcendental, perhaps even ontic, something antesemantical or
three major schools of thought within the contemporary philosophical discussion of hermeneutics which almost parallel Howard's classification.¹ Bleicher distinguishes these schools of Hermeneutics as (1) Method (Emilio Betti), (2) Philosophy (Hans-Georg Gadamer), and (3) Criticism (Jürgen Habermas).² Each of these schools or traditions provides a different approach to meaning and understanding.

A note that needs to be made about the contemporary hermeneutic climate is the provisionality about the process antepredicative, which may be both an effective and trustworthy guide for purposive discourse--that is, for a sound understanding in the areas of goals and motives" (ibid., 90). Relying on insights from Marxian and psychosociological studies. Jürgen Habermas is one of the best-known exponents of this hermeneutic. See especially his Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), and idem, Theory and Practice (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

Howard uses the phrase ontological hermeneutics to distinguish the hermeneutical tradition to which Gadamer belongs. The following statement is characteristic of Gadamer's view of understanding: "The coordination of all knowing activity with what is known is not based on the fact that they are essentially the same . . . but draws its significance from the particular of the mode of being that is common to both of them. It consists in the fact that neither the knower nor the known are present-at-hand in an 'ontic' way, but in a 'historical' one, i.e., they are of the mode of being of historicalness" (Gadamer, 232). See Thiselton, 313-343, for a contextual understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics.


²For a summary of Bleicher's groups see Maddox, "Hermeneutic Philosophy," 519-526.
of understanding.\textsuperscript{1} This means that "understanding" does not have a sharp boundary,\textsuperscript{2} and that the interpreter cannot reach a completely certain understanding. Emilio Betti's hermeneutics may be seen as a challenge to this trend which he considers to be a subjectivistic threat to the objectivity of interpretation.\textsuperscript{3} As Betti puts it:

\begin{quote}
It is here that the questionable character of the subjectivist position comes to a full light; it is obviously influenced by contemporary existential philosophy and tends towards the confounding of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1}See Thiselton, 219. The tendency of provisionality in the process of understanding was already present in Dilthey: "Our understanding of life," he writes, "is only a constant approximation; that life reveals quite different sides to us according to the point of view from which we consider its course in time is due to the nature of both understanding and life" (Wilhelm Dilthey, Meaning in History: W. Dilthey's Thoughts on History and Society, ed. H. P. Rickman [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961], 109). Similarly, Karl Barth writes regarding Schleiermacher's hermeneutics: "In view of the multiplicity of historical and linguistic factors that have to be taken into account, and especially in view of the individuality of the author, where is there not the possibility of a different understanding from that which is the most likely? The art of hermeneutics, then, is an art of relative approximating to the goal of an absolutely certain understanding" (The Theology of Schleiermacher [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982], 179.

\textsuperscript{2}Thiselton, 219.

interpretation and meaning—influence and the removing of the canon of autonomy of the text.¹

It is fundamental to Betti's hermeneutics that authors and texts be understood in their own historical particularity, i.e., on their own terms and with their own logic.²

The methodological significance of these hermeneutical considerations lies in the fact that different methodologies may reflect different hermeneutical presuppositions with significant implication for the other conditions in method's structure. Especially does this brief discussion of hermeneutical theory impact on the issue of epistemology which X have identified as an aspect of the condition of method. Since understanding may be sought analytically (Wittgenstein) or psychosocially (Habermas) or

¹Betti, 73. The canon of autonomy of the text is only the first of Betti's four canons of interpretation. Second is the canon of totality which requires the interpreter to read sections of a text in the light of the whole. Third is "canon of actualised understanding" which is a creative process of reconstructing the text within the interpreter and retranslating the thought of the text into the actuality of the interpreter's own life. Finally, there is the canon of the harmonization of understanding "which argues that only a mind of equal stature and congenial disposition can understand another mind in a meaningfully adequate way. Thus, an interpreter must seek to develop such a mind-set" (Maddox, "Hermeneutic Philosophy," 520-521).

²Thiselton, 253. In Pannenberg's view, however, Betti has taken a backward step "to a stage not only before Dilthey, who recognized values as products of the historical process itself" (Wolfhart Pannenberg, Theology and the Philosophy of Science [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976], 166). Josef Bleicher, however, is of the view that Betti's position is close to that of Schleiermacher and to Dilthey (27-50).
ontologically (Gadamer), hermeneutics forces us to frame the epistemological question to reflect these various ways of conceptualizing reality. In other words, we have not completely understood the epistemological presupposition in a theological method until we understand what its epistemology has to say about the nature of reality. These observations will become clearer as I relate them to their impact on theology.

In *The Nature of Doctrine*, George A. Lindbeck provides three models within which the nature of doctrine may be understood.¹ These are called "cognitive-propositional approach," an "experiential-expressive approach," and a "cultural-linguistic approach."² Epistemologically, a cognitive-propositional approach incorporates informative propositions or truth-claims, which hermeneutically are understood to correspond to objective


realities.¹ Doctrines from this perspective are unchanging cognitive truths, based on propositional revelation.²

On the other hand, an experiential-expressive approach does not epistemologically deal with any propositions which from a hermeneutical point of view may be understood to correspond with the nature of reality. Correspondingly, doctrines from this perspective are interpreted "as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations."³ As nondiscursive symbols in this approach, doctrines are polyvalent and subject to changes in meaning.⁴ Theologically, this approach is obviously antithetical to a cognitive, informative, propositional revelation as a possible epistemological option.

The cultural-linguistic approach is Lindbeck’s proposal which he bases on Wittgenstein, depth psychology, and phenomenology.⁵ In this outlook, “religions are thought of primarily as different idioms for construing reality,

¹Lindbeck, 16.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., 17. Lindbeck sees the theological efforts of Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan as an attempt to combine both the cognitivist and experiential-expressive perspectives. In Lindbeck’s view their attempts are unsuccessful, involving them sometimes in “complicated intellectual gymnastics and to that extent are unpersuasive” (ibid.).
⁵See Neuhaus, 68.
expressing experience, and ordering life."\(^1\) The nature of truth which is construed in this approach lacks the definitiveness which characterizes the cognitive-propositional approach. Lindbeck writes:

As actually lived, a religion may be pictured as single gigantic proposition. It is a true proposition to the extent that its objectives are interiorized and exercised by groups and individuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things. It is a false proposition to the extent that this does not happen.\(^2\)

The quotation above reflects on "intrasystematic truth" (coherence) which may not necessarily be an "ontological" (correspondence) truth.\(^3\) Clearly, since religion in the cultural-linguistic approach is seen as an idiom for construing reality to its adherents, no universal definition or depiction of revelation is possible, only that view of revelation which is intrasystematically true for the particular religion.

All these portrayals of the nature of doctrine reflect different hermeneutical positions that are affiliated to different epistemological positions. For instance, the affinity of the cultural-linguistic approach to analytic hermeneutics is quite evident.

\(^1\)Lindbeck, 47-48. Religions function as languages or cultures.

\(^2\)Ibid., 51.

\(^3\)Ibid., 64-67.
The conclusion from this discussion is quite simple. To understand the condition under which men produce cognitively, this analysis on the structure of method led us to the nature of presuppositions. A key presuppositional element seen was epistemology. Epistemology, however, is illuminated by contemporary hermeneutics. Therefore, a full disclosure of method in theological analysis requires a clarification of epistemology, and its hermeneutical ramifications.

One final deduction from Buchler’s definition of method is needed to bring this analysis of the structure of method to completion.

**Power of Method as Activity**

Buchler is careful to distinguish the power of method from other kinds of human power. For Buchler, a method is not any kind of human power, but "a power to manipulate complexes characteristically within a perspectival order."\(^1\) Thus, the power of method is a deliberate kind of power. The thought of the power of method, however, brings to view the notion of activity.\(^2\)

\(^1\)Buchler, *Method*, 101.

\(^2\)Buchler argues that ordinarily, when one says that he does not take another’s method, or when different people disagree that some methods are better than others, it is not of powers that they are directly thinking but of activities. Nevertheless, in such a situation, according to Buchler, although the disputants have activities in mind, "a reference to powers is correlated and unavoidable" (ibid.).
Furthermore, Buchler argues that although a power may exist prior to given instances of its exercise, the designation of a power as a "method" implies the expectation of activity. Again, "a methodic power also implies prior activity, within which it came into being: the prior activity warrants its discernment as a power."¹

Buchler explains the nature of the activity that is implied in the power of method. The activity and the method are not two separate things. For Buchler, it is not accurate to think of methodic activity as the realization or actualization of method. The activity is the "translation" of the power in a literal sense in Buchler's view: first, either in the form of a transformation into something else, or second, in the sense of furthering human purpose towards completion.²

The nature of method's activity should also be understood in the total context of Buchler's definition of method. It should be remembered in particular that, from Buchler's definition, the power of method in an "order of utterance" is "recognizable," which is a reminder that "the instances of any method are bound to each other by appreciable similarities."³ The similarity of the instances of methodic activities invokes the idea of a pattern of

¹Ibid., 135.
²Ibid., 136.
³Ibid., 137.
operations. Indeed, Buchler observes that when criticism concerns itself with methods, it either commends or reproves a pattern. He explains that when we seek a method, we wish to find a way to accomplish what we want. A specific end is assumed, the challenge being to reach it. Therefore, Buchler concludes that "in seeking a method we wish, not simply to complete the operation of this, but to be able to accomplish a completion repeatedly" (emphasis mine).

The view that emerges from the brief discussion above is as follows. The idea of a method that is not to be used is self-contradictory. Method implies an activity. More importantly, a method's activity must be recognized in its contours to the extent that it would be susceptible to repetition.

The theological significance of the preceding discussion is the following. Legitimacy in theology requires that one makes explicit the precise steps followed in arriving at conclusions, be they doctrines or opinions. It is possible to see how the repetition of activity relates to the other conditions outlined above. It would seem that the repetition and the pattern of activity required must be

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1Cf. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, where method is defined as a pattern of operations.


3Ibid.

4Ibid., 135.
reflected in the consistency with which data are employed, goal is maintained, and hermeneutical conditions upheld. In other words, to the extent that a particular method's hermeneutical presuppositions are held, its relevant data employed in a prescribed manner, and an eye is kept on its intended goal, that method would be capable of repeated operation. The activity germane to any particular method would consist in the maintenance of its hermeneutical conditions, the adoption of its relevant data, and its employment in a prescribed manner and a commitment to the end or goal envisaged by the method.

**The Relations in the Structural Conditions of Method**

This discussion has led to the identification of three major components or structural conditions of method: data, goal, presuppositions (epistemology, ontology, and system). In this brief section I wish to explore the relationship that exists among these components.

Although for purposes of analysis I have distinguished the individual conditions of method, they are mutually interrelated in practice. Hence, the conditions

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1. From the contemporary point of view, as discussed above, it seems that epistemological considerations with regard to knowing may justifiably correspond to hermeneutical principles.

2. The understanding of the mutual interrelationship of the conditions of method is facilitated when the conditions are seen as causes in the Aristotelian sense. From this perspective, a relationship of multicausality may
of method may not be easily arranged or prioritized either logically or chronologically. The relationship between method and its sources is a case in point. Although it used to be thought that method and its materials are initially determinate and perhaps self-sufficient, the relationship is understood differently today. Today method and material are understood to be dynamically and mutually related in such a way that they influence and condition each other. John Macquarrie expresses this point of view when he argues that "method and content are inseparable in theology. Any discussion of method in abstraction can be only provisional."^4

The relationship between material (data) and goal reflects a similar situation as the one noted between method and material. S. T. Coleridge gives the goal a primary be detected amongst the conditions of method. In the words of Aristotle, "things can be causes of one another (e.g., exercise of good condition, and the latter of exercise; not, however, in the same, but the one as end and the other as source of movement)" (Aristotle, Metaphysics [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948], 1013b, 9-11).

^1This relationship is already evident in Nygren when he imitated Kant to say that "material without method is blind and method without material is empty" (Nygren, 3-4).

^2See for example M. R. Cohen, who defines method as "any procedure which applies some rational order or systematic pattern to diverse objects" ("Method, Scientific," Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences [New York: Macmillan Company, 1933], 389).

^3See n. 1 above. See also Buchler, Concept of Method, 15-20.

^4Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology, 34.
Buchler takes pains to examine Coleridge's concept of the leading idea in detail and concludes that "plans may either precede methodic activity entirely or emerge articulately in the course of it." Indeed, as noted above, one may argue that insofar as the first structural condition of method provides the material which is manipulated and directed towards the achievement of the goal, material becomes constitutive of the goal.

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1 A key thought in Coleridge's treatise on method is the issue that every methodic project rests on an "idea." The idea initiates and fuels the methodic movement, it directs and introduces progression into method, and it ensures unity in the form of a principle by which things may be connected and united. The "leading idea," "master idea," "preconception," "prior purpose" or "pre-cogitation," as the idea is variously called by Coleridge, is the impetus by which a method is launched. According to Coleridge, this initiative idea is "some well-grounded purpose, some distinct impression of the probable results, some self-consistent anticipation" in (Coleridge, S. T. Coleridge's Treatise on Method, 42).

2 Buchler, Concept of Method, 53. Furthermore, Buchler argues that if we take the common procedures that are repeated in every instance of a method, "the ideas that guide them do not initiate them, but are coequal with them" (ibid.). For a complete discussion on this issue see ibid., 50-56.

3 This line of reasoning would seem to be consistent with a scientific way of thinking about the place of material in methodic activity. Thomas F. Torrance argues that the "scientific way of acting and thinking . . . in every field of learning and discovery . . . is no more and no less than the rigorous extension of our basic rationality, as we seek to act toward things in ways appropriate to their natures, to understand them through letting them shine in their own light, and to reduce our thinking of them into orderly forms on the presumption of their inherent intelligibility" (Theological Science [London: Oxford University Press, 1969], 106-107). See also the significant place given to data by Lonergan, when he states that "without data there would be nothing for us to
Perhaps it is more accurate to posit a multicausal relation with respect to method, material, and goal.

On investigation, the place of presuppositions reveals a similar multicausal relation with the rest of method's conditions. Consideration of presuppositions shifts the emphasis to the cognitive subject in methodic activity. Bernard Lonergan uses the metaphor of "rock" to emphasize the primary place of the subject in methodic activity.¹ Yet Lonergan himself recognizes the dependence of intentional and conscious operations on data.² Furthermore, his notion of the objectification of conscious and intentional operations, and possible revisions to them, shows how data, or the material principle, impact on one's experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding³ (in sum, one's hermeneutical principles).

To summarize, although the conditions of method may be distinguished formally, they relate to each other in a multicausal fashion. From a strictly formal point of view, inquire about and nothing to be understood" (Method in Theology, 10).

¹Lonergan, Method in Theology, 19-20. Lonergan argues that while the conscious and intentional operations of the subject may be subject to clarifications and extensions, the conscious and intentional operations as such do not admit of revision, since the revisions are given in consciousness. Hence "the rock, then, is the subject in his conscious, unobjectified attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, responsibility" (20).

²Ibid., 10.

³Ibid., 14-19.
it is possible even to postulate a principle of "ontological parity"1 amongst the conditions of method. Nevertheless, from a material point of view (i.e., when the formal conditions of method are applied to concrete content), it is possible that one of the conditions may be elevated above the others in a way that makes it constitutive of the others.

Conclusion

In this chapter the need has been raised to formally engage in the question of theological method. I have shown that the pluralistic situation of contemporary theologies creates an exigency for the formal discussion of method's nature. I have gone beyond merely raising the question of method to develop a formal structure of method by isolating its conditions of possibility. These are the conditions which formally come together to make a method what it is. I have shown that these conditions are in the form of presuppositions of three main kinds: hermeneutical, teleological, and material. Thus every theological method involves a complex set of activities which includes hermeneutical, teleological, and material presuppositions. These presuppositions may be explicitly stated by the

1By ontological parity, I mean that none of the conditions of method is more or less significant in methodic activity when considered from a strictly formal point of view. Each condition is an indispensable element in the methodic process.
theologian as in David Tracy's case. But in other instances, they may be diffused in the corpus of the theologian's work as in the case of Oden whose theological method is the subject of this dissertation. In all cases, however, theologians may decide to use different interpretations of these set presuppositions which comprise the formal conditions of method. Pluralism in theology may be traced to these different interpretations of the formal conditions of method. In the next chapter I will attempt an analysis of Oden's method with the specific goal of evaluating it from the perspective of the hermeneutical, teleological, and material presuppositions it assumes.

A word about terminology is important at this point. For the rest of this analysis, I will treat each of the conditions in method's structure as a presupposition. This less technical use of the term is to recognize the obvious fact that each of the conditions in method functions as a presupposition in the sense of an assumption which influences the concrete shape and procedures of the method and the result of the theological enterprise.
CHAPTER 4

ODEN'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS
OF ITS THEORETICAL FORMULATION

Introduction

The theology which is being developed and popularized by Thomas C. Oden is labeled postmodern orthodoxy.¹ According to Oden, postmodern orthodoxy, essentially, looks for something beyond modernity to provide some meaning and value that transcends the assumptions of modernity.² For Oden and most postmodern orthodox theologians, the classical texts of ancient Christian

¹Oden, Agenda for Theology, 48. Oden is careful to remove any mistaken identity between the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and Reinhold Neibuhr and his postmodern orthodoxy. According to Oden, it will be more accurate to view his postmodernism as precisely opposite to neo-orthodoxy, for it is "paleo-orthodox" in the sense that "it seeks only to represent the old orthodoxy in a credible way amid the actual conditions of the modern world. It is searching for its pre-modern roots, yet joyfully living before God within the framework of modern pluralism" (57). On the other hand, Oden's postmodern orthodoxy, while it seeks to recover ancient ecumenical orthodoxy, is distinguished from fundamentalism. In Oden's words, "even though fundamentalism belongs collusively to modern historicism, however, it still cannot be thought of as postmodern in our sense because it never became disillusioned with modernity, never risked a deep encounter with modernity's experimental edges, and never bottomed out on modernity's skid rows" (59).

²Ibid., 49.
tradition and Scripture are the source of meaning and value.\(^1\) The method that Oden finds appropriate for postmodern orthodoxy is variously called Vincentian or the method of classic irenic exegesis.\(^2\)

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyze the Vincentian method as presented by Oden. I propose to present Oden's explicit pronouncements on the Vincentian method in an analytic, systematic fashion. Nevertheless, the aim of this chapter is not simply to give an accurate description of Oden's method. I intend to subject Oden's portrayal of his method to further analysis for a couple of reasons. First, since discourse on method is a secondary reflective activity, such an analysis will help to identify the various elements of the method. Second, since theologians understand theological method differently, it becomes necessary to show by way of analysis the manner in which Oden's construal of method differs or agrees with other interpretations of theological methodology. Thus, the goals in this chapter are, first, to

\(^1\)Ibid.

\(^2\)Oden, "The Long Journey Home," 79. Oden argues that this method is implicitly employed by ancient ecumenical teachers. Furthermore, one sees a functional view of the method "in the central Anglican formularies, the Homilies, the Book of Common Prayer, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the works of Cranmer, Jewel, Hooker, Gibson, Thorndike, Jackson, Taylor, and Wesley, as well as in scholastic Lutherans like Gerhard, and in some measure in Calvinists like A. J. Niemeyer, as well as in many post-Tridentine Catholics" (idem, *The Living God*, 332).
describe and analyze Oden's Vincentian method with the view to understanding its composition and movement, and, second, to understand it in relation to the question of method in general.

To obtain the goal set for this chapter I follow three clear and simple steps. First, I give a general presentation of what Oden says about the Vincentian method. Second, I embark on an analytical discussion of the matters presented in the general description of the Vincentian method. Since the goal is to understand Oden's method within the context of a general, theoretical understanding of theological method I need to follow a method of analysis that lends itself to standard comparative analysis within methodological theory. Therefore, this analysis of Oden's method is undertaken on the basis of the formal structure of method developed in chapter 3. Third, I attempt to show how Oden's method, in its operation, relates to the other components of its formal structure.

General Introductory Description to Oden's Vincentian Method

It is quite evident that one cannot undertake any analysis without a subject matter being at hand for analysis. Since the purpose of this chapter is to analyze
Oden's method, it becomes necessary to start by considering Oden's explicit description of his theological methodology.¹

According to Oden, during the first millennium Christian orthodoxy had an implicit theological method:

Theology speaks of the triune God on the basis of the eventful self-disclosure of God in history, made known in Scripture, rigorously reflected upon by reason, and experienced personally through a living tradition, whose faith seeks an understanding of itself in each new context.²

Oden understands theological method to deal with the "ground rules" by which theology is supposed to proceed.³ He argues that debates on theological method often boil down to the question of authority, i.e., statements to be admitted in discourse about God.⁴ In this context, Oden gives the quotation above to reflect what he perceives to be the "normative self-restrictions" that prevailed in the first millennium of Christian theology. According to Oden, his Vincentian method is a proposal advocating a return to those implicit normative self-restrictions of doing theology during Christianity's first millennium.

¹This overview has to be brief since the main outline of the method will serve as the subject-matter for subsequent in-depth analysis. The goal of the overview, then, is to highlight the key elements in Oden's method as presented by him.

²Oden, Agenda, 57.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.
The quotation above on the implicit theological method of orthodoxy reveals three main things about Oden's method. These three things are important to our discussion because they encapsulate other statements by Oden on method. First, theological method must enable us to do theological reflection in sympathy with the interpretive tradition of Christianity. In this statement we see Oden's basic hermeneutical presuppositions in his method. Reflection ought to be done in the context of an experienced tradition, which means that Oden's postmodernity is a quest for rootedness. In After Modernity he wrote:

The postmodern person has been through the best and the worst that modernity has to offer. The postmodern person is looking for something beyond modernity, some source of meaning and value that transcends the assumptions of modernity. Neck deep in the quicksands of modernity, the postmodern mind is now struggling to set itself free. Some of these postmoderns have happened onto classical Christianity and experienced themselves as having been suddenly lifted out of these quicksands onto firmer ground.¹

Not surprisingly, Oden's method attempts to overcome the quicksand of modern theological interpretation by adopting classical Christian tradition as the authoritative guide. In Oden's view, the theological method of orthodoxy does not concern itself with brilliant theological views or whether the faith can adjust itself to various worldviews, but rather asks the question: "What in fact did the apostles

¹Oden, After Modernity, 60.
teach? What is the tradition we have received?"¹ In fact, Oden is of the opinion that, taken seriously, the preceding question will "simplify the theological effort considerably."² But for Oden, the answer to this question is not necessarily an exegetical one.

The answer to the question, What is the tradition we have received? leads Oden to the notion of "consensus."³ The tradition we have received is that which reflects the ancient ecumenical consensus, and theological method is the process or activity to recollect that consensus. Therefore, there is in Oden a presupposed preference for the interpretation of Christian teachings especially during the first five centuries of Christianity, simply because those centuries reveal an unequalled consensus in Christian teaching.⁴

The question naturally arises as to how one establishes the consensus. The answer to that question leads us to the second main point about Oden's method evident in his quotation on the implicit theological method

¹Oden, Agenda, 159.
²Ibid.
³Oden points out what the notion of consensus is all about in his method. "Among classical exegetes, those who have gained the widest consensus are quoted more often than those who have tended to elicit division, speculation and controversy" (The Word of Life, xiv-xv).
⁴Oden, The Living God, 325.
of orthodoxy. The point has to do with the material/data one employs to establish Christian teaching.

According to Oden, the sources or data for doing theology evident in the implicit theological method of orthodoxy are Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition.\(^1\) Scripture is the primary source which is rigorously reflected upon by reason and experienced personally through a living liturgical tradition.\(^2\) Reason’s reflection on Scripture which is experienced through tradition creates a fund of Christian teaching which may not be dispensed with. This is especially the case for the first five centuries when a unique consensus on Christian teaching was formulated. Therefore, patristic sources and ancient ecumenical councils come to occupy a prominent place in

\(^1\)Oden, *Agenda*, 157.

\(^2\)Ibid. Charles Brummett is correct in his observation that Oden has been consistent throughout his career in his insistence upon the fourfold sources for theology. It is true, however, that earlier in his career, Oden formally placed greater emphasis on reason and experience whereas the postmodern orthodox Oden now seeks a major role for tradition in his theology (Brummett, 22-23). See also Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 11.
Oden’s method. These become the source for the consensus.¹

Oden writes:

The study of God in the Christian community proceeds out of (1) authoritative sources, such as Scripture, ecumenical councils, and consensus-bearing early ecumenical theologians, as distinguished from (2) unauthoritative or supplementary sources which include non-consensual theologians, scientific and moral inquiries, historical-critical studies, individual experience, speculation, meditation, philosophy, and psychology.²

¹In a personal interview with Oden in July 1994, he insisted that one does not establish the consensus. One simply looks for it in the councils first, and subsequently, if necessary, in the patristic sources. In this interview Oden pointed out the value of the Vincentian method, especially in controverted issues in Scripture. In such cases, Oden argues that one should consult the ecumenical councils for answers, failing which one should next proceed to the Fathers, especially the consensual Fathers who were often quoted. To look for the centrist ecumenical consensus, Oden focuses on the documents of the seven great ecumenical councils, their dates and central topics treated. These were: (1) Nicea, 325, defining the triune God in a way that rejected Arianism; (2) Constantinople, 381, affirming Jesus' humanity against Appollinarianism and the Spirit’s divinity against Macedonianism; (3) Ephesus, 431, affirming the unity of Christ’s Person, and Mary as theotokos, against the Nestorians; (4) Chalcedon, 451, affirming the two natures of Christ against Eutychianism; (5) Second Council of Constantinople, 553, against Nestorianism; (6) Third Council of Constantinople, 680-681, against Monotheism; (7) Second Council of Nicea, 787, against Iconoclasm; see The Living God, 349-350. Besides these Councils, Oden stresses the writings of the most consensual patristic sources, especially the eight "Doctors of the Church": Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Crysostom from the East, and Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great from the West (Pastoral Theology, 7). Oden includes the following as having been widely and perennially valued for accurately stating points of ecumenical consensus: Gregory of Nyssa, Hilary, Leo, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin. Also classic consensus includes classic Reformation sources (The Word of Life, xvii).

²Oden, The Living God, 342.
Elsewhere, Oden distinguishes his sources by comparing them to a solidly grounded pyramid of sources where Scripture and early Christian writers are at the base and the most recent interpreters are at the apex.\(^1\) It seems quite evident that Oden's choice and use of theological data are influenced strongly by his methodological principle: i.e., the Vincentian method is basically a procedure or process to formulate Christian teaching or resolve problems in Christian teaching by seeking what has generally been received as orthodox for Christian doctrine.

The third point which comes out of Oden's statement on the implicit theological method of orthodoxy is that theological method seeks an understanding of Christian teaching in each new cultural context. Here we have Oden's view of method as an activity or method as efficient cause. This means that Oden's method as an activity involves two movements: appropriation and renewal. Oden insists that "we cannot renew something we have not yet understood. We cannot expand a tradition we have never appropriated."\(^2\) It is quite clear that in Oden's method, appropriating and recovering Christian roots involves acquaintance with the patristic sources and the councils. But as the analysis in

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\(^1\)Oden, *The Word of Life*, xiv-xv.

later sections will reveal, Oden is not so clear about how the renewal in each cultural context is to be undertaken.¹

To summarize this general description of Oden’s method, the following points may be noted. Theological method in Oden is essentially conceived as a procedure, an activity which requires two sequential processes. The first activity is to acquaint oneself with authentic Christian teaching. According to Oden, the time and place for this is the first five centuries of the Christian era and in the ecumenical councils and the consensual patristic writers. The second activity involves a renewal of the tradition without changing its substance, although we are not told exactly how this may be done. Both of these activities have several conditions and implications which can be addressed only after the theoretical analysis of Oden’s Vincentian method has been accomplished.

This general overview of Oden’s Vincentian method raises issues which can be clarified only after careful analysis. Among them, for instance, the following may be noted: Why should we necessarily prefer early Christian teaching? What hermeneutical assumptions are involved in

¹This issue becomes quite acute when Oden observes that “the development of doctrine does not imply amending the substance of doctrine in each new age. It does mean addressing the changing vitalities of each new historical situation with the original apostolic tradition. The perennial challenge of ministry is to learn to deal with this tension imaginatively and faithfully, so as to neglect neither the authenticity of the tradition nor the actual conditions of the emergent world” (After Modernity, 54).
the preference for early Christian consensus? What implications do they have for contemporary Protestant theology? On what basis can Scripture, patristic writers, and ecumenical councils be placed on the same footing as authoritative sources? Is theological method basically an activity? Does the conception of method primarily as an activity mask the influence of other equally significant principles on method?

Analysis of Oden’s Vincentian Method: Conditions to the Method

These issues require clarification and resolution, which means that Oden’s method requires analysis. As noted in the introduction to this chapter I intend to perform this analysis using the formal structure of method developed in chapter 3 of this dissertation. In using the conditional structure of method developed in the previous chapter, I wish to re-order the analysis by beginning with the component of presuppositions (i.e., hermeneutical presuppositions), followed by goal (i.e., teleological presupposition), and subsequently ending with data of Oden’s method of theology (i.e., material presuppositions). This order has a logical advantage which I consider appropriate for the present exercise, whereas the order I followed in chapter 3 (data, goal, and hermeneutical presuppositions) has a practical advantage which fitted best my theoretical analysis. The order I followed in chapter 3 was a logical
deduction from the definition of method which formed the basis of the analysis. Here, it is more practical to consider one's presupposition as foundation to goals established and the material employed in achieving those goals.

Hermeneutical Conditions

As was suggested in the brief introductory outline of the Vincentian method, several key fundamental presuppositions seem to undergird the theological method Oden is promoting. In the previous chapter we saw that hermeneutical presuppositions may be categorized into three types: epistemological, ontological, and systematic. In what follows, I attempt to uncover the hermeneutical presuppositions assumed in Oden's methodology.

Epistemology

The word epistemology, from the Greek epistēmē (knowledge or science) and logos (knowledge or information), suggests concern with knowledge about knowledge.¹ Therefore, epistemology concerns itself with questions such as "What can we know, and how do we know it?"²


Oden's desire to return to what he perceived to be the implicit theological method of Christianity's first millennium already reveals an epistemological stance which becomes one of the key hermeneutical principles of his method. As already noted, this hermeneutical key follows from Oden's preference for early interpretation of Christian teaching. Those early centuries reveal a unique consensus about theological epistemology.

The notion of "consensus" is a primary epistemological concept which, for Oden, finds its clearest expression in the ecumenical councils and the consensual fathers of the early centuries of Christianity. This "consensus," in turn, appears to involve several key epistemological notions, which I will presently explain. They are: revelation, faith, and reason. A good grasp of these concepts both in themselves and in their interrelationships is critical to an understanding of Oden's conception of the Vincentian method. I begin with a discussion on the concept of revelation which functions as a foundational hermeneutical principle in Oden's method. This discussion seeks to place Oden's view of revelation within the broad landscape of available interpretations of revelation.¹

¹Gabriel Fackre, The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977). Fackre acknowledges a ferment in the doctrine of revelation and points out that it is related to current challenges to Christian faith, modern and postmodern (11). For a selective listing of some of the challenges to the doctrine of revelation see Avery Dulles, Models of
Revelation

In describing Oden's early theological interests in chapter 2, I hinted at his concept of revelation.¹ The connection between his view of revelation and the modern, Revelation (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 6-8. Dulles provides five broad models for conceptualizing the numerous contemporary understandings of revelation. These are: Revelation as Doctrine, Revelation as History, Revelation as Inner Experience, Revelation as Dialectical Presence, and Revelation as New Awareness (27-28). As helpful as Dulles's models are, he realizes that theologians may not be neatly pigeonholed within one and only one of the models. Theologians may combine elements from two or more different types. For my purposes, I prefer to employ a more simplified approach which is built on the distinction between Augustinian and Aristotelian approaches as they affect the theology of revelation. The broad contours of this approach are provided by Gabriel Daly, "Revelation in the Theology of the Roman Catholic Church," in Divine Revelation, ed. Paul Avis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 23-44. Daly singles out the salient, though generalized, differences between the two schools of thought as they affect the theology of revelation as follows: "First, Augustine's epistemology does not allow of a sharp distinction between natural and supernatural knowledge. . . . Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, favoured the autonomy of reason, and consequently of philosophy, thus separating philosophy from theology in a way that struck the Augustinians as constituting a dangerous break with tradition. Second, Augustinianism refused to make an explicit distinction between rationally derived and revealed truths; whereas Thomson sees revelation partly as a supplement. Third, Augustinianism values the will and the affections . . . over the speculative intellect; whereas Thomism sees in the intellect the highest human faculty. Finally, the Augustinian disposition to regard revelation as illumination favours attention to revelation as a continuing process; whereas Thomism lends itself to the objectivisation of revealed truths" (emphasis mine) (25-26). It is significant to note that Paul Tillich saw in the conflict between Augustinians and Aristotelianism a rehearsal of "almost all the problems of our present-day philosophy of religion" (A History of Christian Thought [New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968], 141).

¹Oden, The Living God, 330.
Barthian non-cognitive view was noted. It appears that this view of revelation has remained with Oden even after his theological transition. A more detailed and careful presentation of his present view of revelation is needed at this point.

Nature of revelation. Oden provides what amounts practically to his understanding of the nature of revelation when he writes:

Revelation includes every manifestation of God to human consciousness, reason, conscience, and historical awareness. . . . By revelation is meant not primarily the imparting of information but rather the disclosure, appearance, self-giving, self-evidencing of God. Rightly known, God illumines all reality, all human experience, all revelation, and all religion.¹

With respect to the exact nature of revelation, Oden describes it as an act or event which bestows meaning to a whole order.² Oden cites Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, the Babylonian captivity and return, and Christ’s resurrection as revelatory events, but in each case he seems

¹Ibid. This view of revelation held by the postmodern Oden stands in continuity with that expressed in his "Barthianly oriented discussion of Kerygma and Counseling" (Oden, Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy, 41). Consistently, Oden has understood revelation as divine self-disclosure in a Barthian sense. From this perspective, Oden is able to say that faith, as a response to God’s self-disclosure, "sees revelation both in nature and history, although it does not regard either nature or history as synonymous with revelation" (Oden, Kerygma and Counseling, 32).

²Oden compares the revelatory event to the role of one sentence in a book, the understanding of which makes an otherwise difficult book comprehensible.
to place the emphasis on the events "as experienced" by the
people of Israel and the apostles.\(^1\) Revelation is,
therefore, defined as "any act by which God makes himself
known in human history--through particular events of
nameable people--in order that humanity writ large may
become more responsive to the disclosure of divine
goodness."\(^2\) As long as an act in history functions to make
humanity more responsive to divine goodness, that act is
revelation.

Oden is insistent that the content of revelation,
which is God's redemptive purpose, is disclosed or effected
in the form of a personal history. This is why he
emphasizes the history of the people of Israel and
especially the history of Jesus Christ. The history of
Israel and Jesus Christ represents God's historical
revelation. God is revealed through events. The historic
mode of revelation has significant consequences for Oden's
understanding of the essence of revelation. For Oden the
historical character of the salvation events runs counter to
any rationalism that seeks to formulate unhistorical ideas
or any mysticism that wishes to merge self in God.\(^3\) The

\(^1\)Oden, *The Living God*, 333.

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)The interconnection between revelation's content,
mode, and essence is observable in this quote, "Christianity
proclaims a Saviour who meets us personally. The saving act
of God is an event that occurred through the life and death
of Jesus in history. Hence the recollection of the
basic problem Oden finds with such rationalism and mysticism is that they seek timeless truth. Here Oden appears to disavow the classical view of revelation—inspiration whereby supernatural, timeless truths are conveyed. Thus for Oden, revelation is not the disclosure of supernatural, timeless truths.

Locus of revelation. According to Oden, God's love, will, and mercy have been revealed "through a historical process, so anyone who carefully examines history may discern that revelation." Accordingly, revelation is located in, though not synonymous with, historical events.

In general terms, Oden recognizes that revelation is "present in all the history of religions," however, God's special revelation "is more particularly made clear, according to Jewish and Christian understandings of salvation event always has the character of historical and personal recollection. This constant historical reference of faith runs counter to a rationalism that seeks to formulate unhistorical ideas, or a mysticism that wishes to merge self in God. Both seek timeless truths, not the truth that is personally made known in time through a personal history" (Thomas C. Oden, Life in the Spirit, Systematic Theology Series, no. 3 [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992], 71).

1 Ibid.


3 Oden, The Living God, 330.

4 Oden, "Revelation and Psychotherapy," 243.
revelation, by looking at a particular history, at events, through which the divine intent is disclosed.¹ Oden’s notion of revelation as history shows up in his view that the study of God is essentially a study of revelation, that is, the study of history—the history of Israel, the history of Jesus, and of the early Christian community.² It should be emphasized that for Oden a historical study of the early teaching of the Christian community is essentially a study of revelation.

God’s revelation in history is not, however, simply a past event. According to Oden,

God continues to reveal himself in ever-emergent human history, but in ways that are finally illuminated only by looking at how God has become known in Israel and Christ. There is complementarity and tension between the past self-disclosure of God in history and the ways in which God becomes revealed in the present, so that the present complements, extends and develops, but does not negate, past disclosures.³

¹Ibid., 331.


³Oden, The Living God, 334. This way of understanding revelation which endows the Christian community with revelatory value appears to explain why Oden attaches great significance to the community and its consensus. However, this conception of revelation seems to have contemporary significance for Oden. With the element of continuity in Oden’s understanding of historical revelation, it appears that he conceives of history along the lines of critical theory. According to critical theory, historical continuity is given with the narrative structure as one of its properties (Charles Davis, "Revelation and Critical Theory," in Divine Revelation, ed. Paul Avis, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 87-99). Davis underscores
Oden explains that as new events occur in ever-emergent history, their meanings are illumined within the community by reflection out of the primary revelatory event. This is the concept of historical reasoning which will be discussed subsequently in its relation with revelation.

The revelation-inspiration process. It may be helpful at this point to outline the key features of revelation-inspiration in Oden. In Oden, as we have seen, revelation does not impart supernatural timeless truths; at best, revelation imparts truths that are personally made

the dynamic nature of history in critical theory by observing that "historical continuity is not to be identified with temporal duration. It is an autonomous construction, not derived from a prior temporal structure, but the result of the form-giving constructivity, characteristic of historical consciousness" (92). See also Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method," in Understanding and Social Inquiry, ed. Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 346-350. For a narrative interpretation of revelation, see Fackre, The Doctrine. According to Fackre, among the post-liberal refrains that are to be heard in the narrative interpretation of revelation are: (1) the understanding of the biblical world and an overarching narrative that renders the identity of the Christian God, (2) the resource role of the Christian community and its ecumenical doctrine in the interpretation of Scripture, (3) the eclectic use of extrabiblical experience and categories comparable to post-liberal "ad hoc apologetics" (Fackre, 11).

At this point we may observe overtones of Augustinian understanding of revelation. Cf. John Macquarrie who argues that "only because the primordial revelation is continually renewed in present experience can it be revelation for us" (Principles of Christian Theology, 7).
known in time through a personal history.\textsuperscript{1} These truths are embodied in personal events in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ. How is the human recipient able to recognize revelation? Revelation is recognized because it "addresses a human faculty seated in the human constitution, the faculty of believing."\textsuperscript{2} Furthermore, the divine disclosure is self-evidencing to faith which is able to receive it by virtue of a special certitude constituted by trust and by assurance through the Spirit.\textsuperscript{3} Details regarding the reception of revelation will be taken up later. For now, we observe that the human recipient is able to recognize revelation because of the human faculty of believing and with the help of trust and the Spirit.

In sum, God's revelation occurs in historic events and the human recipient recognizes it because he or she is so constituted to recognize it with the help of the Spirit. How is the revelation that is so recognized communicated?

\textsuperscript{1}Oden, Life in the Spirit, 71.

\textsuperscript{2}Oden, The Living God, 399. Compare with the subsequent discussion on common grace under the section "Ontology."

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 399. Oden outlines how human beings have some grace-bestowed capacities to receive revelation. First, "human reasoning is created by God with a capacity for reaching toward God by thinking, choosing and speaking"; second, "human freedom is created by God with a capacity for responsiveness to God"; third, "human personality is created with the restless yearning for communion with the unseen but present personal God"; finally, "human eros is created with some capacity . . . to love God" (ibid., 24).
Oden affirms a view of inspiration that diminishes the supernatural. He agrees that the authors of Scripture wrote or spoke as moved by God's own Spirit, meaning their consciousness, personalities, and psyches became fittingly adapted instruments of the divine address. However, he cautions that these finite writers were not suddenly made morally infallible, or that they acquired "extrasensory or paranormal powers." The conclusion appears inescapable that there is no supernaturally communicated knowledge in Scripture, a notion which would seem to go against the consensus of classical Christianity.

Thus, the consciousness, personality, and psyche of the human recipient receives the aid of the Holy Spirit in accurately remembering and recollecting the event without necessarily acquiring extrasensory or paranormal powers. Who receives revelation? or perhaps more accurately, who perceives revelation in the historic events? The prophets and the early Christian community received it, but revelation is ongoing "in ever-emergent human history," but in a way such that present revelation complements, extends,

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1Oden, Life in the Spirit, 68. According to Oden, this is the commonly received assumption (ibid., 70).

2Ibid., 69.

3Ibid., 334.
and develops past disclosures.\(^1\) Furthermore, the meaning of new revelation is illumined within the Christian community.\(^2\)

**Conclusion**

Oden’s views on revelation as a continuing process and his willingness to see the divine presence within the Christian community as "revelation" reflect the contemporary approach in Catholic theology on revelation.\(^3\) This approach

\(^1\)Ibid.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)See Daly, "Revelation in the Theology of the Roman Catholic Church." Notice that the phrase "Augustinian approach" is used by Daly to capture a certain predisposition towards revelation rather than to describe Augustine’s doctrine of revelation per se. Oden’s understanding of revelation as a continuing process and of tradition as revelatory accords with the Augustinian approach. Among Catholic theologians, Daly includes the Tübingen theologians and John Henry Newman as sharing in this approach. The Augustinian/Franciscan understanding of revelation as illumination is said to have been revived by the Second Vatican Council in Roman Catholic theology. Gabriel Daly sees its beginnings with the "modernist" movement in Roman Catholicism with such writers as Maurice Blondel and George Tyrell. Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan stand in this tradition as "intellectualists who have been purged of their Aristotelianism by having been obliged to reckon with the Kantian revolution" (Daly, 35). Altogether, this understanding of revelation is said to promote the idea of revelation as a dynamic ongoing influence. See also Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946). For Brunner, "Divine revelation is not a book or doctrine; the revelation is God Himself in His self-manifestation within history. Revelation is something that happens, the living history of God in His dealings with the human race" (8). The dynamic view of revelation appears to be the populist position in contemporary Protestant theology. Although different theologians approach it with different nuances and distinctions, by and large, the contemporary Protestant theology shares the Augustinian/ Franciscan understanding of revelation. A contemporary Protestant representative of this position is Donald G.
to revelation, which has been labelled "Augustinian," is considered to be very contemporary in Protestant theology as well.¹ Does Oden believe in propositional revelation? Not if he sees revelation primarily in terms of self-disclosure along the lines of neo-orthodoxy.² Oden's concept of revelation appears to suit his methodological principle. On the one hand, by emphasizing history as the locus of revelation, it enables him to accord the consensus of the early Christian centuries with special theological

Bloesch who sees his position as standing "in continuity with that of the Reformers as well as that of modern theologians like Barth and Brunner" (Holy Scripture [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 48). See also Braaten, New Directions in Theology Today, 2:11–32. Braaten thinks that "the coupling of revelation with history is an omnipresent feature of modern theology" (16).

¹Daly, 35.

²In a personal interview with Oden he acknowledged that his view on the Bible as revelation does not differ much from Barth. He insists, however, that Barth's view of revelation is not only Calvinist, but accords with early classical Christian teaching. There seems to be a general reserve on Oden's part on issues that involve the supernatural in space and time. In his discussion on eschatology, for example, Oden has a subsection titled "Reserve in Eschatological Reasoning" which qualifies the rest of his presentation (Oden, Life in the Spirit, 372 ff). Oden writes, "It is well to remind ourselves that time-bound human reasoning is ill equipped to speak of what is not yet. Present reasoning proceeds on the basis of assumptions about time and space that cannot be transferred or applied to eternity. . . . The purpose of Scriptural testimony to the future life is not to describe in detail what will happen as if with scientific certainty, but to console, encourage and engender hope in what God has provided in the future. . . . 'The Bible uses the earthly, human categories of time and space not primarily to describe literally where we will be and how we will exist after time, but to describe symbolically who we will be'" (327).
significance while it appears to position him well within the contemporary situation on revelation for the renewal of the tradition. It is simplistic, therefore, to assume Oden to be the bearer of unreflective and static dogmas. It seems more consistent to see Oden as standing in the new traditionalism of David Tracy and Peter Berger.¹

Reason

Another key epistemological concept that is already implicit in the notion of consensus is reason. Since consensus relates to the meeting of minds, reason becomes a central element of any consensus. What is the nature of reason in Oden's epistemology? In other words, how is reason a channel or avenue of knowledge of God? We need to explore this question as I continue to clarify the hermeneutical condition in Oden's method.

The nature of reason. Oden depends on St. Augustine to define classical Christianity's understanding of reason to include "all the capacities of the soul to behold and receive truth."² In this sense, reason is fundamentally a

¹Richard Quebedeaux is of the view that Oden stands in the line of the "new traditionalism" of David Tracy, Peter Berger, and Michael Novak, in the sense that he sees Oden as seeking to incorporate the achievements of modernity into an ethos and intellectus that transcends modernity" (Richard Quebedeaux, "Book Reviews: Agenda for Theology," Christian Century 96 [1979]: 474-74).

²Oden, The Living God, 375. Still reflecting Augustine, Oden explains that the capacity of the soul to behold and receive truth includes intellectual, emotive, and
dimension of the soul. One may infer from this observation that Oden understands the nature of reason along the Platonic-Aristotelian lines. Yet, he is critical of an exaggeration of the power of reason that results in abstract idealism.\(^1\) At the same time he is equally critical of overemphasizing the competency of sensory experience.\(^2\) For Oden, neither inductive nor deductive reasoning is able to give absolute certainty.\(^3\)

While not discounting the value of inductive and deductive reasoning, Oden points to a different form of reasoning, namely, historic reasoning, as the predominant form of reasoning in Christian theology. By historical reasoning Oden implies a logic that is "derived from Hebraic historical consciousness."\(^4\) This means that in his understanding of the nature of reason, Oden places emphasis neither on reason that is constituted of innate ideas, nor on reason that is composed of sensory experience. Rather, his emphasis is on reason that is constituted by historical consciousness. Thus, although Oden criticizes Hegel's predictable logic of history's thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, he is convinced that Hegel's fundamental idea

\(^{1}\)Ibid., 387.
\(^{2}\)Ibid.
\(^{3}\)Ibid., 389.
\(^{4}\)Ibid., 391.
accords with Hebraic historical consciousness—"a type of reasoning derived from history."¹ From this brief discussion we can conclude as follows. Although Oden does not explicitly discuss the nature of reason epistemologically, we may extrapolate from his concept of historical reasoning and his basic agreement with Hegel's fundamental idea of reasoning in history that he construes reason in essentially historical terms.² It appears that the question of faith is significantly related to this particular understanding of reason. Before we take up the question of faith, it is important to point out the epistemological implications of reason understood historically.

The products of reason, historically construed, must necessarily be tentative since history is ongoing. Applied to Christian theology, this means that Christian teaching essentially incorporates a sense of plausibility, corrigibility, and perspectival plurality.

¹Ibid. In a sense, the construal of reason in historical terms relates to the hermeneutical shift in Oden from modern culture's emphasis on individual experience to corporate experiencing. Thus we begin to see the diminishing role of reason and experience in the method of the postmodern Oden.

²Cf. Henry D. Aikens, who writes, "In Hegel's philosophy we find, for the first time, a thoroughgoing attempt to view all philosophical problems and concepts, including the concept of reason itself in essentially historical terms" (The Age of Ideology [New York: George Braziller, 1957], 72). For a concise overview of Hegel's historical understanding of the nature of reason see Grenz and Olson, 31-36.
For example, on plausibility Oden observes that Christian teaching appeals to different levels of evidence "in order to establish a convergence of plausibility along different and complementary lines."¹ Oden's belief in the value of ecumenical consent bears especially on the question of corrigibility. He notes that

for a time a disproportionate emphasis may have been given to one or another concept, but eventually all these concepts must stand the test of time and either be confirmed or rejected by the living ecumenical church under the guidance of the Spirit.²

On perspectival plurality, Oden uses the metaphor of a prism to make his point, noting that the study of the Christian tradition is like looking through a magnificent spectroscope.³ He remarks:

It therefore becomes mean and restrictive to assume testily that only one color is the most beautiful or permanently normative for all the rest. Furthermore, because history is not completed, we need not assume that we have already seen all possible tonal nuances of Christian orthodoxy.⁴

It is remarkable that these features of corrigibility, perspectival plurality, and process, when it comes to the question of truth, serve as the hallmarks for what has been called hermeneutic holism.⁵ These

¹Oden, The Living God, 353.
²Ibid., 348.
³Oden, Agenda for Theology, 113.
⁴Ibid.
distinguishing features of hermeneutic holism are a reflection of the contemporary rejection of "foundationalist ideas of transparent fact, absolute and univocal truth, and mind-objectivity." In other words, hermeneutic holism refrains from epistemological certainty, embracing instead process and tentativeness. Oden's relativism, however, must be distinguished in its structure from the antifoundationalism of postmodernity. The relativism of truth in Oden appears to stem from the fact that the translation of the absolute truth of a timeless God into temporality can only produce a relative certainty of absolute truth. In other words, while he conceptualizes absolute truth in the timeless God, he rejects absolute certainty of absolute truth in the temporal realm.

These brief reflections on hermeneutic holism nevertheless bear close resemblance to Oden's views on the status of Christian teaching as briefly presented above. It would seem that Oden's epistemology and method are flexible to accommodate elements of hermeneutic holism. This observation in turn raises several questions about the real import of Oden's method. Is Oden's conversion from liberalism a complete one? Is his postmodern agenda also a

1Ibid., 186. Generally hermeneutic holism is associated with antifoundationalist thinking. See ibid., 187 f.
postfoundationalist agenda? These questions may be addressed in detail in the evaluation of Oden's method.

We may now return to the discussion on the question of faith to see how it works hand in hand with reason in its historical constitution.

Nature of faith-reason relation in Oden. On the basis of several Scriptural texts and classical Christian teachers, Oden defines faith as "the capacity to discern by grace the things of the Spirit, and the capacity to trust in the reliability of the divine Word." Trust is related to Oden's concept of faith in two ways. Not only does it set the stage for faith's spiritual discernment, it defines faith's relation to the object of discernment. Oden's use of the phrase "trusting frame of mind" points to the connection between faith and reason. Oden affirms firmly that faith does not occur without grace, but

1 Obviously Oden's inclusion of experience, tradition, and reason as sources of theology would seem to place him within the liberal tradition in the overall foundationalist camp. But it seems his treatment of those sources of theology colors them with such relativity and tentativeness that his approach reflects hermeneutic holism.

2 Oden, The Living God, 397.

3 Ibid. The notions of spiritual discernment and trust are fundamental to Oden's thinking on faith. The centrality of trust to faith seems to be underlined by Oden when he writes that "faith embraces the complementary meanings of the trusting frame of mind that has confidence in Another and the trustworthiness that can be relied upon" (ibid.).

4 Ibid.
he argues that "since faith is the discernment of spiritual truth, faith is not separable from reasoning, rightly understood."¹ Rather, "faith is a way of reasoning out of God's self-disclosure, assisted by grace."² Thus, for Oden, faith is only a special type of reasoning,³ and like any reasoning, faith must have its database.⁴

¹Ibid. For Oden this means that "rightly understood, divine grace has already bridged the chasm we perceive between natural and revealed theology" (ibid, 7). This insight appears to have remained with Oden throughout his career. His earlier concern of seeking rapprochment between theology and therapy was built on an ontology which in its nature is informed by the Christ-event. For example, in The Structure of Awareness, Oden argues that the shortcoming of a strictly phenomenological analysis of the human predicament of guilt is overcome in the knowledge that, due to the Christ-event, there is such a thing as "the ontological impossibility of guilt before God" (Oden, The Structure of Awareness, 83 ff.).

²Oden tries to work out the faith-reason relationship in the following quotation. "In faith, the reasoning is directed to the things of the Spirit, rather than to empirical data. Hence it is impossible to have faith without reasoning, or belief without any form of thinking, although our thinking is always inadequate to its infinite subject. Since faith enlarges human vision, the logic of faith is an enlarged, not a diminished, logic" (Oden, The Living God, 397).

³Ibid., 398.

⁴"In theology, the inductive database of experiences and observations is mediated to us from many others--countless examples of faith, suffering, martyrdom, and witness stretching over many centuries, relayed to us through unwritten and written sources. It is the language of this community's experience with which theology has primarily to deal. Among the written sources are those consensually designated by the community as canonical Scripture, as authoritative witness to the revelation of God. . . . Reason has its data base in Scripture as tested through tradition and experience" (ibid.).
But theological reasoning out of faith's database has its beginnings through faith in revelation and religious experience, which Oden explains as follows.¹ God's revelation is addressed primarily to faith.² Faith receives this revelation (which is constituted by self-evidencing divine disclosure) in a special certitude constituted by trust and the Spirit's assurance. Subsequently, it is the task of faith to pass on the evidences of revelation to others, using reason to state, clarify, and present these evidences. I have shown in this discussion of revelation that history is its locus. Therefore, the evidences of revelation must be found in historic events. Since faith discerns spiritual truth in historic events, the evidences of revelation that are passed on to reason are the evidences which faith discerns in historic events as worthy of revelatory value.³ Oden expounds on the role of reason in faith's reasoning as follows.

The evidences of God's self-disclosure that faith recognizes, faith now calls upon reason to recognize and credit. In this way, the judgment of the mind is

¹Oden, The Living God, 399 ff.
²Ibid. Oden explains faith reception of revelation: "In addressing faith primarily, revelation addresses a human faculty seated in the human constitution, the faculty of believing. This faculty is at work, accepting the truth on sufficient evidence, wherever human knowing occurs, and especially spiritual knowing" (emphasis mine) (ibid.).
³It appears that for Oden spiritual truth is contrasted with empirical scientific truth in the sense that the former engages itself with the meaning of history (ibid., 386).
given the honor of examining the evidences of faith. While faith is raised up to receive and embrace revelation, reason is bowed low to behold its self-giving love. Faith does not despise reason, but presents those evidences for revelation in history that are understandable to reason [emphasis mine].

So what is the relation between faith and reason in Oden? It is evident that in Oden faith and reason are not opposing concepts. Reason appears to be constitutive of Christian truth itself since it is called upon to "recognize and credit" the evidence of God's self-disclosure that faith recognizes in history.

Conclusion on epistemology

How do these observations on revelation, faith, and reason relate to each other in Oden's epistemology and his overall methodology? This discussion on revelation shows that history is central and relevant to Oden's epistemology at two levels which reveal the interrelationships among revelation, history, faith, and reason. First, the self-evidencing divine disclosure (i.e., revelation), which faith receives in faith's reasoning, is historical events out of which, by grace, revelation is discerned. This is the case for the originative Christ-event and the other events recollected in Scripture as well as the continuing manifestation of God to human consciousness, reason, and conscience, all of which, we have seen, are deemed to be historical awareness. Thus Oden's historical understanding

\[^{1}\text{Ibid.}, 400.\]
of revelation ties faith to reason and to history and makes the latter a fundamental aspect of his epistemology.

Second, history is relevant to Oden's epistemology by virtue of the trust structure of faith. Oden argues that one would never know and trust a person unless there were a concrete history of trustworthiness that revealed that person's reliability.\(^1\) Similarly Oden argues that it is through a historical process in the Christian community that the "eternal One" has become known as unfailingly trustworthy.\(^2\)

The importance of the history of the Christian community to faith explains why Oden emphasizes such concepts as consensus and tradition in his method. This historical perspective of the Christian communities also explains Oden's call for a predisposition toward ecclesial

\(^1\)Ibid., 401.

\(^2\)Ibid. In this regard, Oden writes, "Christian faith is not a faith in faith. . . . Sound faith is based upon that which calls forth faith--a history of trustworthy relationships through which the other . . . or Other . . . becomes somehow known as trustable. Words in themselves cannot engender that trust. It takes a history" (ibid.). In response to his own question, how is faith possible? Oden observes: "Faith is not simply poured down our throats without any choice of our own. . . . We do not get far reasoning about God until we somehow enter into that sphere in which faith in God's historical revelation is taken seriously--hence the world of Scripture, of the celebrating community, of preaching and sacrament. There again and again we meet others who have taken risks in relation to that trustworthy One, and again and again, according to their witness, God makes himself known as trustable, . . . Faith is indeed possible because we know that in the community God has been trusted" (ibid.).
trust as "providing the believer with evidence for consideration, reflection and testing against other forms of knowledge."¹ For Oden, this history is not static. It is a process, which according to him, "is another way of talking about the lordship, presence, and revelation of God in history."² It is a process whereby each new historical situation of the church requires the recollection of revelatory events, including the Christ-event, with the goal of seeking to make those events understandable in the new cultural-historical context.³ This is what Oden calls historical reasoning, and he argues that theological reasoning is historical reasoning.⁴ This concept of reason in Oden plays a hermeneutical role, which in conjunction with faith, trust, and history serves Oden’s method well. First, it makes a case for ecclesial trust and hence for the appropriation of the consensual tradition. Second, and

¹Ibid., 402.

²Thomas C. Oden, Beyond Revolution: A Response to the Underground Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 66. Here Oden writes: "The truth occurs in history. In a sense the truth is history occurring" (ibid.). In this context, Oden is arguing against the call for the dissolution of the institutional church in the sixties. Depending on Hegel’s dialectic, Oden sees this call as "kairotically functional." Yet it is only a single moment of the process. What is important is the whole process which evidences the Lordship, presence and revelation of God in history. It is in this sense that the truth occurs in history.

³Oden, The Living God, 391-392.

⁴Ibid.
perhaps more importantly, it becomes instrumental for the second aspect of his method as activity, namely, to renew the tradition.

To summarize, Oden presents faith and reason in a way that enables reason to perform a complex hermeneutical and apologetic role. By virtue of its relation to faith’s embracing of revelation, reason appears to constitute meaning and hence plays a hermeneutical role. Yet, when "the judgment of the mind is given the honor of examining the evidences of faith," reason appears also to play an apologetic role. Furthermore, if faith is rationalized through history, reason is in turn historicized through the Christian community’s consensual history (i.e., tradition). Thus Oden appears to part with the classical view of reason by adopting a more contemporary approach which roots reason in the cultural foundation of the Christian community’s tradition or history.¹

Ontology

We now turn our attention to the second main hermeneutical presupposition in Oden’s method, namely, the ontological presupposition. My goal is to examine how Oden’s ontology conditions his method. In this section we

¹As a general observation while Oden’s epistemology emphasizes history and tradition, in its particulars, i.e., revelation and reason, it does not appear to follow the consensus of the first five centuries of Christian theology. The issue will be discussed more fully in my overall evaluation of Oden’s method.
will also consider whether his ontology is consistent with his epistemology. By ontology I mean Oden's understanding of the fundamental mode of reality as a whole.⁠¹ In the history of philosophy, the interpretation of Being has followed two main paths: timelessness and temporality (time).⁠² Ontology in theology deals mainly with God's mode of being as well as anthropology and cosmology in terms of the nature and supernature relationship. These aspects of ontology will be the focus of this discussion.

God

The mode of God's being in the history of Christian thought has followed the philosophical notions of timelessness and temporality. Discussions on the temporality of God are a recent phenomenon⁠³ since classical


³For a thorough account of the contemporary discussion on God's nature see, for instance, Ted Peters, God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993); Jürgen Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991); Colin E. Gunton, The Promise of
Christian teaching has generally followed the interpretation of timelessness.¹

Oden does not address the issue of time and timelessness directly but it is quite obvious that he affirms divine timelessness.²

On the eternity of God, Oden quotes approvingly Boethius’s classical definition of divine eternity as "simultaneous and perfect possession of interminable life."³ Depending on Aquinas, Oden affirms that "for God, all time is now."⁴ Also, "all moments of time’s succession unfold in eternal simultaneity in the presence of the maker of time."⁵ Indeed, Oden affirms that "the eternity of God is not an indefinite extension of temporal duration."⁶ It is quite

¹See Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reexamination of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God" (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Theology, 1984); Colin E. Gunton, Becoming and Being (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 1-19.

²John Sanders, "Historical Consideration," in The Openness of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), observes that Oden "affirms divine simplicity, timelessness and exhaustive foreknowledge without explaining how these cohere within his understanding of God’s responsiveness" (190, n. 162).

³Oden, The Living God, 62.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 62, 63.

⁶Ibid., 62.
obvious that these are classic indicia of a timeless understanding of being. Yet Oden is hesitant to follow through completely the implications of divine timelessness, which is especially evident in his treatment of the immutability of God. He agrees that the biblical witness views God not as immobile or static.¹ Yet, confronting the Scriptures that speak of God "repenting," Oden asks: "Do they imply a fundamental change in the divine being or essence, or in the divine plan?"² He answers No to both questions, and explains that "the Scriptures employ anthropomorphic metaphors and analogies to speak of God’s free responsiveness to human needs amid changing historical circumstances."³

However, Oden attempts a mild redefinition of classical immutability to make room for the biblical witness. Thus while he recognizes that immutability is sometimes stated in "wooden, Aristotelian terms that lack the vital energies of the biblical witness" he observes that overestimating the stranglehold of Aristotle upon the ancient ecumenical tradition, recent theologians may have underestimated the enduring counter-Aristotelian influences of the tradition of exegesis of the Psalms, Isaiah, Paul and John. The divine immutability of purpose and essence does not mean that God is unresponsive or incapable of interaction, but that the

¹Ibid., 112.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
deeper intentionality of the will of God—chesed . . . is sure and unchanging.¹

It may be that Oden's attempt to redefine and talk about immutability in novel ways reflects his acknowledgment of an uneasy relation between his conception of method, which places great emphasis on history, and the classic understanding of God's being in timeless terms.

In his desire to redefine some of the classical attributes of God, as for instance immutability, Oden appears to trivialize the powerful philosophical connotations that accompany these traditional, classic attributes. Thus he calls for the use of simple language about God rather than technical terms, arguing that the latter have collected conflicting meanings and cosmic associations in history so as to render them less serviceable.² So he asks, regarding immutability, "Does it imply complete unresponsiveness in God or constancy of covenant intent?" and with respect to perfection, "Is it a completely excellent quality, or a process of becoming excellent in the highest degree?"³

¹Ibid., 113. John Sanders counts Thomas Oden among contemporary theologians who are beginning to espouse an "open view" of God. However, he notices the ambivalence, observing that "Oden, however, always puts the best spin on the Fathers and generally fails to criticize the biblical-classical synthesis" (Sanders, 190, n. 163).

²Oden, The Living God, 29.

³Ibid. It remains to be seen, however, whether what is needed is simply a change in the language about God or a foundational change in the ontological presuppositions about God.
The apparent uneasiness in Oden’s thinking about God’s eternity and immutability, as classically defined, is not surprising given his historical epistemological presuppositions.¹ In other words, while Oden’s affirmation of timelessness seems to be a direct result of his methodology, which seeks agreement with the patristic tradition, the emphasis on history in his method requires on the one hand an adjustment to his concept of God’s being.² On the other hand, consistency in Oden’s hermeneutical principle requires a corresponding cosmology in terms of nature and supernature that connects the timeless God with temporal entities. It is to this latter issue that we now turn our attention.

Nature/Supernature

In the preceding section, we have seen that Oden’s view of God’s mode of being is consistent with traditional classical timelessness. My concern is to show how in Oden’s view a timeless God is able to function in the temporal


²It may be that this particular difficulty in Oden’s method points to a more fundamental problem of the method, i.e., being orthodox and postmodern at the same time.
level. The answer to this question seems to be provided by Oden's discussion of the classical doctrine of grace.

Grace, according to Oden, is more than a doctrinal footnote. Referring to the Second Council of Orange, Oden observes that grace is necessary to know truth, avoid sin, act well, etc. According to Oden, grace (charisma) is one of the gifts of the Spirit which "are freely given, divinely enabled and effectively offered through historical and concrete means, being received in faith" (emphasis mine).

Oden's discussion of common grace is particularly relevant to the ontological discussion of nature and supernature. According to him, common grace refers to the Christian teaching of how far grace reaches. Oden remarks that the extent of common grace is human history. In Oden's view, God the Spirit works at some primordial level throughout history to prepare the heart of every potential

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1 There is no question in Oden's mind that God functions in a real sense at the temporal level. In the context of the debate over the call for the dissolution of the institutional church, Oden wrote against the champions of this call: "Many of us cannot really buy or seriously grasp the notion that God embodies himself in time or eventfully participates in history" (Beyond Revolution, 21).


3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 33.

5 Ibid., 63.
believer.\textsuperscript{1} Nevertheless, common grace is more evident in times of unusual historical crisis.\textsuperscript{2} This means that, ontologically, historical processes are grace-laden, i.e., the mode of being of historical processes are such that they are able to communicate supernatural realities. Indeed, among the means of grace, Oden mentions, besides Scripture and prayer, historical reasoning.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1}Ibid., 64. This is an ontological insight which has shaped the thinking of Oden throughout his career. It is in this regard that Oden sees his present efforts as an extension of his earlier work. He himself is of the view that until this basic ontological insight is understood, his "present classicist trajectory, might on superficial glance, seem to be an unexplained reversal of the previous direction" (Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition, 21).

\textsuperscript{2}Oden observes that the notion that the study of conflict in history is intrinsically related to the work of the Spirit received its most complete modern statement in Hegel (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 21. Oden writes: "There is sufficient grace for you to discern and hear rightly, provided you are attentive to the means of grace through scripture, prayer, historical reasoning, and dialogue" (ibid.). See also Oden, The Intensive Group Experience, 89-98. Here Oden looks for a theological foundation for the effectiveness of encounter groups. Oden argues for an implicit ontological assumption of group trust. The basis of his argument is that reality itself is trustworthy because "God has taken the initiative in addressing history with his infinite forgiving love, and making himself known as trustworthy" (ibid.). The early Oden wrote about this ontological insight using categories borrowed from such figures as Bonhoeffer (concrete formation) and Teilhard de Chardin (Christ's worldly formation). The postmodern Oden, however, speaks of these same ideas more in terms of grace. But the correspondence had already been made earlier on. The early Oden observed that the Christ-event is the "ontological mucilage," "the cosmic adhesive" of the world of being. Of this event Oden wrote that it is "the hidden structure of grace within the secular dynamism of the world" (Contemporary Theology and Psychotherapy, 96-97).
Human history, however, is not the only locus of common grace. According to Oden, common grace is evident in human rational processes. At this point, Oden relies on early Christian writers to support the view that human rational processes are intrinsically divinely imbued. He refers approvingly to Justin Martyr to say that Plato's teachings were not wholly alien to Christ or wholly the same. Similarly he observes with Origen that the Word was present among the heathen philosophers in seminal form "engendering some refractions of the truth, just as it worked in Abraham anticipatively through his faith."\(^1\) Again from Justin Martyr he notes that the whole of human history, "through reason and conscience, participated anticipatively in the Logos, who became in due time revealed in Jesus Christ."\(^2\) Oden shares the view of the early Christian apologists that "the human soul is at its deepest level persistently a reflection of the image of God, and in a sense naturally Christian."\(^3\)

The point to be made from this analysis of common grace in Oden is as follows. Although God's being in Oden is timeless, God is not a God who is cut off from man and

\(^1\)Oden, *The Intensive Group Experience*, 75.

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)Ibid., 75, 76. Oden himself does not discuss what the human soul at this deepest level might mean. Whether this reflects the Aristotelian view of the active intellect remains an open question.
the world. By virtue of common grace, God is able to connect with man at the temporal level through human reasoning and consciousness as well as historical processes.

Oden does not tell us exactly how common grace connects the timeless God with history. Nevertheless, since he ties grace closely to reason, and we know that reason is a dimension of the soul, then the soul appears to be the vehicle for the timeless-temporal connection. But if I have correctly deduced Oden’s understanding of the nature of reason as historically constituted, then it may be that the soul embodies a historic component which somehow makes the timeless-temporal connection possible.

Upon further reflection, one may draw the following conclusion. Taken in its totality, Oden’s ontology reflects a metaphysical view that appears platonic in its structure. A timeless God implies timeless, immutable truths that reside with God at the realm of ideas. Nevertheless, these truths, by virtue of common grace, exist at a primordial level and in a shadowy form in historical processes and human reasoning and consciousness. This is why Oden writes that heathen philosophy was looking through “the broken lens of self-assertive-reasoning”\(^1\) when they anticipated the coming justice and mercy of God. In a similar move, Oden quotes Justin Martyr approvingly that "all the writers of

\(^1\)Ibid., 74.
antiquity were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted Word\(^1\) (emphasis mine).

We have now come to the point after exploring Oden's epistemology and ontology where I examine the principle or idea in Oden's thought that creates harmony between his ontological and epistemological presuppositions and at the same time bring coherence and meaning to the main features of his theological enterprise. This principle or idea I call system.

**System**

Towards the end of this discussion on Oden's ontology, we observed his affinity to classical ontology. Consequently, in this section I want to point to his ontology and epistemology as providing the ground for his system, system being that coherence of and unity of meaning existing between Oden's ontology and epistemology. These provide the ground for his system because it is here that ultimate truth and meaning are located. Yet in this section, we need to know more specifically what idea plays the systematic role in theology. Formally, this idea is the idea of God, but materially, it is the idea of Christ the Word.

\(^1\)Ibid., 75. Indeed, Oden's ontology overall reflects the classical consensus of the Fathers and the Councils. In this, Oden is faithful to his commitment to the consensus of the first five centuries of Christian theology.
Christ, the Word, becomes the systematic idea for Oden's method because, according to Oden, God is supremely and definitively revealed in Christ. According to Oden, the central hypothesis of the Christian way of studying God is that "through Christ the Revealer of God, we see into the meaning of other events from beginning to end."1 Furthermore, Jesus Christ "is that moment in the historical process in which the part reveals the whole--through this particular lens, we come to know the One . . . who is the ground of our being, who gives life, in whom all things cohere."2

How does this idea—that Christ, the Word, is the system in Oden's method—relate to his ontological and epistemological presuppositions? Since the system formally represents the coherence of meaning between the ontological and epistemological presuppositions, it means that the understanding of Christ, who reveals God, will be impacted by these presuppositions. More specifically, Christology, the nature of truth, and a host of similar issues will be affected by the epistemological (revelation, history, faith, reason) and ontological (divine timelessness, nature/supernature) issues discussed under hermeneutical presuppositions.

1Oden, The Living God, 334-335.
2Ibid.
How does the system, the Christ event, work as a hermeneutical presupposition in Oden's method? The system works hermeneutically in predisposing Oden's method at a very fundamental level. We need to recall that, according to Oden, God is supremely and definitively revealed in Christ. By making the system, the Christ event, the supreme and definitive event of Christian revelation, Oden necessarily diminishes the doctrine of Scripture in his method. Scripture is no longer revelation, but a record of it. In itself, this move takes away from the propositionalist view of revelation. Moreover, the emphasis in Oden on revelation as God's self-disclosure disparages the propositionalist view of revelation.

The general hermeneutical effect of the system as construed in Oden's method is reflected in the tentativeness with which Oden approaches such matters as eschatology and miracles in Scripture. For example, on the question of Jesus' resurrection narratives, whereas Oden wishes to take them seriously as historical narratives, he warns that "it is demeaning to the resurrection narratives to treat them as if they are merely objective reporting."¹ It may be true that, as Oden observes, "no presentation of evidence is totally devoid of subjective interpretation,"² yet the implied suggestion in these observations that the biblical

¹Oden, The Word of Life, 494.

²Ibid.
narratives may not be objectively factual runs counter to the consensus of early Christian tradition. Yet ironically, the tendency to deny the historicity of the events in Christ’s life had its roots in the early Christian traditions’ application of the Greek notion of timelessness to the divine essence.\(^1\) In like manner, the tendency in neo-orthodoxy to see revelation more as self-disclosure in encounter and less as propositions results from its overemphasis on divine transcendence.\(^2\)

**Summary and Conclusion**

Oden’s treatment of Christ, the Word, as the supreme and definitive revelation is quite neo-orthodox in outlook. It is true that the classical consensus also emphasized the Christ event. Yet the latter’s emphasis on the centrality of the revelation of God in Christ did not deny Scripture of its revelatory status. The neo-orthodox outlook in Oden stems from his fundamental view of revelation as self-disclosure. This is why in Oden, Scripture is not directly revelation but a record of it. It is also for this reason that the Christ event becomes the hermeneutic system in Oden’s method. In this way, the ontological presuppositions of Oden’s method are met in the divinity of Christ. At the same time, limiting revelation to self-disclosure and making

\(^1\)Such was the challenge posed by Docetism. See Oden, *The Word of Life*, 147-148.

\(^2\)See Grenz and Olson, 63-112.
the Christ event the definitive revelation, the epistemological presuppositions of the method are equally met.

Teleological Conditions

In the previous chapter, I sought to establish the general principle that method in general, as a cognitive activity, has a purposive condition.¹ In other words, method as a general category implies a goal while concrete methodic activities imply a specific goal actually pursued. This explains the importance of clarifying and making explicit the specific goal pursued by methodic activity. As we seek to understand any particular theological method, we need to clarify the conception of goal. Hence in this section, I wish to undertake this exercise with reference to Oden’s theological method.

Goal of Theology

In chapter 2, I pointed out that Oden based his conception of the possibility of dialogue between theology and psychotherapy on a particular understanding of the nature of theology. This particular understanding of theology distinguishes theology in general from "Christian theology."² In this distinction, Christian theology is a secondary reflective activity which focuses on Christian

¹See chapter 3, 81-84.
²See chapter 2, 27.
faith. Faith in this instance is understood as humankind's affirmative response to God's self-disclosure in the Christ-event.\(^1\) Oden maintained that this "faith can only be understood from its own centre, since it is a response to an event which is only meaningful in the full sense to those who respond to it."\(^2\) Therefore, the goal of Christian theology is to understand "the particular idea of God, peculiar to the Christian community, the idea of God as revealed in Jesus Christ."\(^3\) This conception of theology's goal continues to be maintained by Oden.\(^4\)

In The Living God, Oden is careful to point out that the final subject matter of Christian theology is a logos "about nothing less than theos as known in the faith of the Christian community."\(^5\) Again, he notes, "theology has a definite object to investigate, namely, the understanding of God as known in the Christian community."\(^6\)

\(^1\)Oden, Kerygma and Counseling, 31.
\(^2\)Ibid., 16.
\(^3\)Oden, The Structure of Awareness, 87, 88.
\(^4\)Brummett observes that "throughout his career Oden has understood theology's task to be secondary, i.e., theology does not reflect directly upon God, but upon God as experienced within the community of faith" (165).
\(^5\)Oden, The Living God, 330.
\(^6\)Ibid., 352. To set forth the understanding of God known in the Christian community is a constructive task which depends significantly on the use of reason. Oden calls this use of reason historical reasoning and observes that it is premised on community participation and empathetic listening for consistency. According to Oden,
The foregoing characterization of Christian theology is bound to raise questions about the status of the knowledge of God obtainable in Christian theology. More specifically, what is the relation between the knowledge of God as known in the Christian community and the subject matter of God as such? In other words, is the knowledge of God within Christianity exhaustive of the knowledge of God? These questions are intended to clarify the precise goal of Christian theology as perceived by Oden.

It appears that Christian theology's conception of God potentially may not be exhaustive of all there is to know about God. While Oden is not prepared to neglect Jesus' statement that "no one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6), he maintains that "all religions contain although a radical commitment to the church's tradition is not a prerequisite to theological reasoning, "it does require some capacity for at least tentative openness to Holy Writ and holy tradition" (ibid.). Oden explains the participative requirement by observing that Christian teaching is something like sociology, in that "it requires complex data gathering and the interpretation of socially shared symbols and experiences" (ibid., 377). Furthermore, Oden argues, on the basis of "classical ecumenical writers," that the acceptance of legitimate and reasonable authority is itself an eminently reasonable act (ibid.). According to Oden, "When the believer trusts the church's authority to discern and canonize Scripture, distill from it the creed, and propose a rule of faith as a guide to Scriptural truth, that is viewed as a reasonable act" (ibid., 402). Oden complains that such predisposition to ecclesial trust is lacking in the Protestant psyche because of the Reformation's "hermeneutic of suspicion" toward the Roman Church. According to Oden, to depend upon "Holy Writ and holy church for supplying the very evidence with which faith deals does not imply sacrifice of intellect, however, but a reasonable act of openness to evidence" (ibid.).
some truth concerning God, for God has not left himself without witness."¹ Again, "Christianity does not claim that no truth exists in other religions, only that the true God has become human in Jesus Christ."²

The following conclusion may be drawn from this discussion. The goal of Christian theology in Oden is rightly knowledge, more specifically, knowledge about God. Yet, this knowledge is proscribed as a knowledge which is particular and peculiar to the Christian community.³ It is a knowledge that arises from the self-understanding of the Christian community. This brings up the question of theological data, which is analyzed in the next section. The question as to how the Christian community comes by and maintains its particular knowledge of God is an important one. Nevertheless, it must wait till we come to the section of the technical explanation of Oden's method.

But it is relevant in this concluding section to comment on the connection between Oden's hermeneutical

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¹Ibid., 371.

²Ibid. It is obvious that Oden's conception of the goal of Christian theology has ramifications for the relationship between Christianity and the other religions. This specific issue will be taken up in my evaluation of Oden's method.

³Oden's reflection on the goal of Christian theology does not derive from the orthodox consensus as my evaluation of Oden's overall method will show. The classical definition of theology as "fides quaerens intellectum" implied an understanding that was not simply particular and peculiar to the Christian community.
condition and his teleological condition. In particular, how is his view of the goal of theology buttressed by his hermeneutical presuppositions? Oden's epistemology appears to be the key to answering this question. Once revelation does not result in the disclosure of absolute, timeless supernatural truths, the corollary must hold true. In the absence of eternal, universal truths, we are left, by the nature of the case, with relative, particular, "customized" truth.

I have shown how the Christ-event as the system in Oden's method brings harmony to his ontological and epistemological presupposition. Once Oden's system defines revelation less as communication of absolute, eternal knowledge, but more as an ongoing dynamic activity, Christian theology must necessarily be a reflection of the ongoing revelation of God within the particular Christian faith community.

Material Conditions

Discussion in the previous chapter on the conditional structure of method earmarked data as a constitutive component of method's structure. Consequently, in seeking to analyze the theoretical formulation of Oden's method, it is important to examine the data he adopts and
how he employs them to achieve the goal discussed above.\footnote{See John Cobb, Jr., "Theological Data and Method," \emph{Journal of Religion} Vols. 32 to 34 (1953/54): 212-223. Cobb observes that the choice of subject matter and data necessarily determines to a great extent the character of conclusions.}

Some reference has already been made to these sources of data in the preceding section, but presently, I will take them up more formally and systematically.

The term Oden uses frequently for the data of theology is "sources."\footnote{Oden, \textit{The Living God}, 330. Oden uses the phrase "sources of theology" in a very loose and generous way as will be noted soon. Cf. John Macquarrie, \textit{Principles of Christian Theology}, 4, prefers to use the phrase "formative factors" to highlight the fact that the data that are employed in theology are not all on the same level, or of equal importance.} At a preliminary level, Oden introduces the quadrilateral of sources as the basis for the knowledge of the confessing community, but it is important to his thinking to point out that these sources "depend upon and exist as a response to their necessary premise: revelation."\footnote{Oden, \textit{The Living God}, 330.} Thus to grasp more clearly Oden's understanding of the sources of theology, one needs to keep in the background his conception of revelation.\footnote{See pp. 14 ff.}

\textbf{Sources of Theology in Oden's Method}

As we turn our attention to sources of theology in Oden's method, we must remember that these are the sources...
employed by the faith community in its self-reflection on God. In other words, we are interested in sources as the concrete forms adopted by the faith community in reflecting on the God who is known amongst them.

In discussing the sources of theology in Oden's method, I seek to explore two main questions: What main sources are considered, and what due weight is given to each one? It is probably more accurate to think about Oden's use of the term "sources" along the lines of "formative factors" in theology.

Oden prefaces his discussion on the sources of theology by asking the epistemological question, "How does the worshipping community know what it seems to know?" He answers his question by observing that

the study of God relies constantly upon an interdependent quadrilateral of sources on the basis of which the confessing community can articulate, make consistent and integrate the witness to revelation. These four are scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, all of which depend upon and exist as a response to their necessary premise: revelation.

Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, however, do not exhaust the sources of theology for Oden. In speaking of "sources for theology," he implies a range broader than the specific idea of two fonts of revelation (Scripture and

1Ibid., 330.
2Ibid.
tradition). Oden does not specifically indicate how he came to this broad conception of theological sources. In the case of the quadrilateral, he appears to appeal to tradition by arguing that all four are functionally operative, although implicitly, in the most representative of classical Christian Teachers. No rationale is explicitly given for the larger list of sources, yet it appears that the list reflects Oden’s historical understanding of revelation. In the ensuing discussion I

1“We mean more generally those varied channels, means, or conveyances by which the divine address comes to humanity. . . . These sources include creation, providence, reason, conscience, beauty, and personal experience, as well as Scripture and tradition. Broadly speaking, the sources of theology include any means (whether natural, rational, moral, textual, liturgical, spiritual, or divinely revealed) by which the divine goodness is conveyed to humanity” (ibid., 342).

2Ibid., 330.

3Oden has expressed himself more clearly on what revelation is than on what it is not. As noted above, Oden’s use of revelation is meant not primarily for the imparting of information but rather the disclosure, appearance, self-giving, self-evidencing of God. Whether revelation secondarily implies the impartation of information is not clear. In any case, Oden’s position differs from the traditional one which understood revelation "in terms of verbal or quasi-verbal communications by God to recipients who then pass on what they have heard. . . . The primary location of these revealed propositions, furthermore, is commonly held to be the Bible” (David A. Pallin, "Revelation," The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983], 505). It appears that Oden’s concept of revelation reflects the predominant modern concept of revelation as self-revelation (John F. Haught, "Revelation," The New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane [Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985], 884). Wolfhart Pannenberg also believes that in spite of varied
examine the key sources of theology in Oden's method, namely the quadrilateral, with the view to clarifying how he understands each one of them, and the relative weight he gives to them. For each of the sources, I try to clarify Oden's understanding as far as possible, by asking the questions regarding the origin, nature, and its use in theology.

There exists a "present consensus that revelation is, in essence, the self-revelation of God" (Revelation as History, 4). Noting the origin of this strictly defined concept of revelation in Hegel, Pannenberg points out that it became clear for the first time that "the full self-manifestation of God can only be a unique one" (4-5). The implication from this understanding is that "it is no longer permissible to think of a medium of revelation that is distinct from God himself" (ibid.). The upshot of this line of argumentation, in Pannenberg's view, is that "instead of a direct self-revelation of God, the facts . . . indicate a conception of indirect self-revelation as a reflex of his activity in history." Furthermore, "no one act could be a full revelation of God. The isolated conception of a single divine action as the revelation of God most often leads to a distorted view, to an idol" (ibid., 16). Hence, the multiplicity of media or means which reveal, i.e., disclose God's love, will and mercy. Oden observes that "if one takes it as a premise that God makes himself human in history, consequences abound everywhere for the study of God" (The Living God, 21). Furthermore, "Christianity does not limit revelation to Christ, but through Christ sees God's revelation as occurring elsewhere and finally, echoing everywhere" (ibid., 22). In this way, Oden's view of revelation comes strikingly close to Pannenberg's view, with the difference that while Pannenberg's "accent on the universal historical scope of revelation . . . overcomes the cleavage between salvation history and world history" (Braaten, History and Hermeneutics, 20), Oden emphasizes the particular history of Israel, the history of Jesus, and of the early Christian community.
Scripture

Origin. Oden has not worked out a full-blown theology on the doctrine of Scripture, although he expresses himself on the subject in several of his works.¹ Oden’s concept of revelation stands close to Pannenberg’s concept of revelation as history.² Nevertheless, on the question of the origin of Scripture, whereas Pannenberg clearly denies its divine origin,³ Oden appears to accommodate the divine origin of Scripture.⁴ The tentativeness of my conclusion regarding Oden’s position on the origin of Scripture is due to the fact that he is ambiguous in his position. On the one hand, he acknowledges the inspiration of Scripture, arguing that "although the Scriptures do not provide logical

¹In The Living God, 335, Oden promises a full discussion of the sense in which divinely inspired Scripture is the utterly reliable source and norm of Christian theology in a later volume. The third volume of his systematic theology, Life in the Spirit, 67-72, takes up briefly the issue of the Spirit as author of Scripture. Hence we await his full discussion in a later volume.

²See Pannenberg, Revelation as History.

³According to Pannenberg, "there can be no restoring the older view of biblical inspiration" (Wolfhart Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991], 45).

⁴Oden, Life in the Spirit, 68. Oden writes: "That the address of God is clothed in the language of a particular writer with a particular style does not diminish the force of the moving Spirit that enables the writing. These sentences remain as truly God’s own address as if spoken audibly from Sinai’s burning bush" (ibid.).
arguments for the proof of their being breathed out by God, they assert and assume this as a premise."

On the other hand, we are left wondering whether Oden's understanding of Scriptures' origin accords with the old concept of revelation and inspiration as transmission of supernatural hidden truths. In the first place, we have already noted that Oden's usage of the term revelation implies "not primarily the imparting of information but rather, the disclosure, appearance, self-giving, self-evidencing of God." Whether revelation may secondarily involve the impartation of information is not unequivocally stated. At first, it appears that Oden affirms propositional revelation/inspiration when he writes that "Scripture is breathed out by God, the product of God's Word or speech, as breathing is intrinsically connected with human speech." Yet in his commentary on First and Second Timothy and Titus he writes

When we say God breathes or God writes or God speaks, we are speaking metaphorically but confidently,

1Ibid., 70. Similarly, reflecting on the traditional consensus, Oden observes that "the commonly received assumption was that the Spirit so guided the writers that without circumventing their human willing, knowing, language, personal temperaments, or any other distinctly personal factors, God's Own Word was recalled and transmitted with complete adequacy and sufficiency" (emphasis mine) (ibid.).

2See Pannenberg, Revelation as History, 4.

3Oden, The Living God, 18.

4Oden, Life in the Spirit, 67.
of the way the heart of God becomes for us thoughts expressed in words. Scripture could not simply be the product of the fertile minds of good persons, for good persons would not say, "Thus says the Lord," if they were speaking merely of their own private opinions."

From the foregoing discussion we may conclude that Oden’s understanding of the origin of Scripture differs from the classical conception of the origin of Scripture. It remains to be seen, however, how this position influences his understanding of the nature of Scripture.

1Thomas C. Oden, Interpretation: First and Second Timothy and Titus (Louisville: J. Knox Press, 1989), 25. Oden continues to emphasize his theme of revelation as the self-giving and self-evidencing of God when he comments on 2 Tim 3:16, 17 as follows: "Although ‘inspiration of Scripture’ is commonly used to describe this doctrine, theopneustos focuses upon the simple spiration (breathing) of God’s own life into the written word, rather than upon an autonomous process of inspiration as if separable from the Speaker-Breather-Inspirer" (emphasis mine) (Life in the Spirit, 68). In other words, inspiration may not be predicated ontically about the written word. By so defining inspiration, Oden appears to have brought some consistency between his concept of revelation and that of inspiration. Once more, there seems to be some similarity between Pannenberg and Oden. After denying the divine origin of Scripture Pannenberg solves the question of inspiration as follows: "If the word of human speech can point to reality as a whole, to the universal nexus of meaning, to the coherence of truth, and therefore to God, we can see why many cultures have regarded the relevant word as divinely inspired. If the relevant human word that rightly names the meaning of things and events, and thus brings out their truth, can be regarded as inspired, then a word of this kind is naming God as the origin of all reality. To the extent that the human word is apt and true, then it no longer belongs to humanity alone; it is God’s Word" (Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 1:254). Cf. Oden: "It is God who allows God to become recognized. Rightly known, God illumines all reality, all human experience, all revelation, and all religion. In its broadest sense revelation consists of those events through which humanity becomes aware of God. In this general sense, revelation is present in the history of all religions, and, indeed, is a familiar theme in the study of religions" (Living Word, 18).
Nature. On the question of the nature of Scripture, my fundamental concern is to examine whether Scripture is seen as the Word of God, i.e., information from God or as the word of man, i.e., man’s witness to what is perceived as revelation. The nature of Scripture is inextricably linked to its origin. It should not, therefore, come as a surprise that Oden’s views are not clearly spelled out.

On the one hand, Oden uses the "theandric analogy to the authorship of God the Spirit through human writers."¹ Thus,

just as Jesus Christ was truly human and truly God, so the address of God the Spirit in Scripture is truly human—in the sense that it is "fleshed out" in human language, in a historical setting by actual persons living finite lives—without ceasing to be truly God’s own Word that abides forever.²

Furthermore, the fact that the address of God has been clothed in the language and style of a particular writer does not diminish the force of the Spirit that moved the writing. Thus Oden can say that "these sentences remain as truly God’s own address as if spoken audibly from Sinai’s burning bush."³

On the other hand, it appears that the special nature/status of Scripture is derived not from its divine

¹Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 68.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., 69.
origin, but from its consensual formation.¹ Oden explains how Scripture is presupposed in the study of God by showing that a historical revelation requires a written word.² Therefore, for Oden, "the Bible, composed of two sets of testimonies or covenants . . . is the deposit of the sufficient and adequate witness to God’s self-disclosure."³ Thus, it would be correct to infer that, for Oden, the Bible is not the event of revelation but a pointer to revelation which is the Christ event, i.e., the personal appearance of Christ in history. Consequently, there is a definite emphasis in Oden on the historical nature of Scripture as a document. Thus Scripture’s primacy is delineated more in terms of its being the "central preconditioning source of the memories, symbol systems, hopes, teachings, metaphors, and paradigms by which the community originally came into being and has continually refreshed and renewed itself."⁴ Consequently, the basis of Scripture’s primacy and authenticity appears to shift from the divine origination of

¹Oden, The Living God, 334.

²Oden argues that "the saving act of God is an event that occurred through the life and death of Jesus in history. Hence, the recollection of the salvation event always has the character of historical and personal recollection. . . . If revelation occurs in history and calls for continued recollection amid subsequent histories, it cannot proceed safely to transmit this memory without a written word" (Life in the Spirit, 71).

³Oden, The Living God, 336.

⁴Ibid.
its contents (inspiration) to the historical process by which it became authorized and authoritative.\(^1\) Therefore, Scripture becomes in a sense the deposit of tradition, hence blurring the essential distinction between Scripture and extra-biblical tradition.\(^2\)

According to Oden, then, does the Bible contain cognitive truths that have been supernaturally revealed? What does it mean to say that the Bible is the deposit of the sufficient and adequate witness to God’s self-disclosure?

Oden does not come out clearly to deny the possibility of propositions in revelation, neither does he confirm it. It is clear, however, that he shares the view

\(^{1}\text{Oden writes: "The New Testament contains these writings that survived--documents that ultimately went through a complex process of being transmitted, read in public worship, studied avidly, interpreted through preaching, analysed, and finally in due time authorized as being credible witnesses to this revealing Word." In addition, he observes that "it took several centuries for this process of consensual formation to develop into a universally recognizable canon of apostolic tradition" (The Living God, 335-36).}\)

\(^{2}\text{In this connection the following quote is rather significant: "Scripture is the only written access that tradition has to the Christ event. Tradition is simply the history of the exegesis of Scripture. The traditionary process must occur ever again in each new historical circumstances" (Oden, The Living God, 337). Furthermore, "these ever-new formulations of each new period of the tradition’s reflection about itself have been refractions of the matrix of Scripture" (ibid.). See also Frank M. Hasel, Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 116-117, for affinities to Pannenberg’s position.}\)
of revelation as divine self-disclosure, disclosure which is not necessarily propositional.

To summarize this brief discussion on Oden's understanding of the nature of Scripture, we may say with certainty that, in Oden, Scripture's unique preeminence on the basis of the classical doctrine of revelation and inspiration is diminished in favor of a more historical understanding of Scripture as a document. A more historical understanding of Scripture, however, raises important implications for the way in which Scripture is used. Thus, I analyze next Oden's conception of the use of Scripture.

Use. To begin with, Oden affirms that the study of God proceeds on the basis of a quadrilateral of interdependent sources which form the foundation for the confessing community's reflection on revelation. These are

1It must be pointed out that, for Oden, history is not necessarily a closed continuum impervious to supernatural influences. Thus Oden takes issue with the reductionist bias evident in contemporary theology, for example, with respect to the virgin birth of Christ and His resurrection. According to Oden, "if one depends exclusively upon a historical method that starts with a postulate that begs the question by assuming that an alleged event cannot happen if not seen and tested empirically, then that method has ceased to study history and has begun to assert interested axiomatic philosophical presuppositions" (Oden, The Word of Life, 500). Nevertheless, it appears that since, for Oden, the text of Scripture does not necessarily equate revelation, he can encourage the use of critical methods of inquiry (ibid., 529).
Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.\textsuperscript{1} Thus Scripture stands in a quadrilateral relation to other sources which "all exist in response to God's historical revelation,"\textsuperscript{2} i.e., events in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ which are recollected and remembered in the community, written in Scripture, reflected on by reason, and experienced by the community of faith.

To be sure, Oden distinguishes these sources as objective/authoritative (including Scripture and tradition), and subjective/unauthoritative (including reason, experience, etc.), yet none of these even authoritative sources suffices on its own for theological reflection. According to Oden,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{1}Oden, The Living God, 330.
\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., 331. For a thorough discussion of the quadrilateral see Donald A. D. Thorsen, The Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990); Albert Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley," in The Wesleyan Theological Heritage, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 21-37; Ted A. Campbell, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," Methodist History 29, no. 2 (1991): 87-95. The limitation of the geometric term which unintentionally "implies an equality or homogenization of the four elements" has been noted by Thorsen (71). Nevertheless, Campbell comes to the conclusion that "whereas 'Scripture,' 'reason,' and 'experience' stand as clear conceptual categories in Wesley . . . there simply doesn't seem to exist in Wesley a conceptual category, answering to 'tradition'" (Campbell, 94). In Campbell's view, the notion of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is "an intricate composite of these sources, formed under the crucible of Methodist involvement in the ecumenical movement, and then found almost indispensable by Methodists themselves in their defence of a progressive attitude towards biblical authority" (ibid.).
\end{quote}
these four sources—Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—must be always held in creative tension. All are responsive to the revealed word... The over-stress on any one of the four ends in imbalance, like that of a chair with uneven legs. To study God with only one source is as precarious as the balancing act of a pole-sitter.¹

Since all the four sources of theology communicate revelation, it would be absurd to conceive of an independent use of Scripture. Within the matrix of these sources of theology, Oden uses Scripture in a consensual/confessional framework which links up with the next item in the quadrilateral of sources, namely tradition.

Role as Source. What role does Scripture play as a source of theology in Oden's method? On the landscape of sources, Oden maintains that Scripture is the primary source and guideline for Christian teaching. Yet, Scripture is not

¹Oden, The Living God, 341. Cf. Donald G. Bloesch, who argues that "we should seek a statement on Scriptural authority that will do justice to the integral internal relation between Scripture and the tradition of the church" (The Future of Evangelical Christianity [New York: Doubleday & Company, 1983], 120). Wells, "Tradition: A Meeting Place for Catholic and Evangelical Theology?" 60, traces the development of the concept of tradition from the point of view of the Reformers and the Catholic Church and distills what the components of the new theology of tradition are. Wells summarized the new theology in four propositions: (1) there is only one source of revelation, (2) Scripture and tradition both mediate this common revelation, (3) Scripture and tradition can never be in conflict since they arise from the same source of revelation, (4) Scripture is generically no different in nature from tradition since both contain and communicate the same revelation, but it is more important. Wells thinks that "the debate is not between those who share similar views on tradition but differ over the nature of biblical inspiration and hence over the relation between the divine revelation and the written text" (ibid., 61).
the only source, neither does the Spirit's witness completely cease with the canonization of Scripture. New events are to be understood in the light of Scripture, yet "no new or different knowledge is required for saving knowledge of God than that which is revealed in Scripture." 1 Although Oden says that Scripture is the guide for all the other sources, the place of Scripture in the overall structure of Oden's method denies it that role.

How is Scripture connected to the structure of Oden's method? The nature of Scripture as a material source of theology is greatly impacted by Oden's epistemology. His view of revelation, which is a reflection of his timeless ontology with respect to God's being, forces him to see the Bible only as a record, albeit a significant, formative record, of the Spirit witness to the life of Christ. But the Spirit witnesses elsewhere too, as will be seen shortly, namely, in the traditioning process and in personal experience. Therefore, the nature of the Bible, coupled with the nature of the other sources, denies the Bible the capacity to define knowledge certainly and conclusively. This view of Scripture in turn affects or is affected by Oden's goal of theology. To the extent that the goal of theology is to understand God as He is known in the Christian community, one could avoid the issue of certainty and conclusiveness with respect to knowledge about God.

1 Oden, The Living God, 337.
What then suffices, as theology's goal, is simply God, as He is known within the particular community called Christian.

Tradition

**Origin.** I begin by asking the question about the origin of tradition. It is characteristic of Oden to view tradition as the "remembered Word."¹ Thus without explicitly resorting to the etymology of *paradosis*, Oden recognizes the origin of tradition in the "revealed Word."² By the "revealed Word" Oden implies Christ, hence tradition as the remembered Word has Christ as its source. At the same time, Oden is able to say that Scripture funds tradition.³ The apparent inconsistency regarding the origin of tradition is resolved as follows:

It is well to remember that the oral tradition of apostolic preaching preceded the written tradition of New Testament Scripture, so in that sense it is readily conceded that tradition stands chronologically and logically prior to Scripture. Subsequent to the ecumenical consensus on the canonization of Scripture, however, the church views the transmission of tradition from the postcanonical vantage point that assumes Scripture as already having been written and ever thereafter funding and enabling new embodiments of tradition.⁴

It seems quite clear that Oden distinguishes between precanonical and postcanonical tradition. Furthermore, it

¹Ibid., 331.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., 337.
⁴Ibid., 331-332.
appears that, for Oden, precanonical tradition merges into postcanonical tradition. This is because Oden believes that in each new developing historical situation believers reformulate the revealed Word in their own language, yet "these ever-new formulations of each new period of the tradition's reflection . . . have been refractions of the matrix of Scripture" (emphasis mine). Is postcanonical tradition revelation in an original sense? Oden is clear here that postcanonical tradition is a spin-off from Scripture. Yet, the vital and dynamic nature of tradition, as will be seen shortly, implies that reason may acknowledge new revelation from other sources which may, subject to its

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1Ibid., 337. Oden's position on the source of tradition appears to coincide with the view taken by Oscar Cullmann, The Early Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 59-99. Cullmann would reasonably accept Oden's summary that "precanonically tradition is prior to Scripture; postcanonically Scripture is prior to tradition" (Oden, The Living God, 332). Indeed this position accords with that of Josef Rupert Geiselmann, The Meaning of Tradition (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 17, who distinguishes between the transmission of the paradosis to the church by the apostles (including the committing to writing) from the testimony of ecclesiastical tradition. For Geiselmann, the former is by divine action while the latter is a human action, albeit with the assistance of the Holy Spirit's operation. See also R. P. C. Hanson: "We must therefore conclude that by the beginning of the third century any oral tradition which had not by that time found its way to written form in the New Testament was by an inevitable process suffering badly 'against the wrackful siege of battering days'" (Tradition in the Early Church [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962], 51). For a survey of the controversy on the continued existence of oral tradition see Gabriel Moran, Scripture and Tradition (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963).
acceptance by the worshipping community, become incorporated in the tradition.

Nature. Having briefly discussed the origin of tradition, I need now to seek to clarify its nature. The question of the origin of tradition borders closely on the nature of tradition, and it is on this issue that significant differentiations arise. Oden is decidedly against any "uncritical" use of the term tradition that leaves the implication that Christian theology is determined by "rigid formulas and in-group prejudices."1 Rather, tradition

is a vital social reality that receives and transmits the history of revelation. Tradition wants to be danced, sung, feasted upon, and celebrated.2 In this context, the "history of revelation" would seem to imply the cumulative events of God's self-disclosure in the history of the worshipping community. From this discussion

1Oden, The Living God, 338.

2Ibid. For a discussion on the development of the modern dynamic concept of tradition see Yves Congar, Tradition and Traditions (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), 104-107; 360-375; Geiselmann, 81-112; Dulles, The Craft of Theology, 90-94. In Congar's account the main moments of this development include the writings of the Russian orthodox theologian A. S. Khomyakov who incorporated ideas of Shelling's and Hegel's idealism and those of German romanticism. Equally significant among Catholics was the influence of J. A. Mohler and the Tübingen school who interpreted tradition by the use of the ideas of organic, dynamic totality, of historical continuity, of the people, and the Volksgeist. For a brief discussion of Mohler's philosophy as it relates to tradition, see Geiselmann, 52-72.
on Oden's epistemology, these events would be any events in history which faith discerns and reason credits as having revelatory value. Tradition, therefore, has reception and transmission as its poles: reception as the objective pole and transmission as the subjective pole.¹ According to Congar, reception as the objective sense of tradition necessarily assumes the form of a "deposit," which corresponds with the "rule of faith."² Oden recognizes the rule of faith as that which governs or determines what is to be believed for salvation. Nevertheless he argues that "it is not necessary to decide between Scripture and what the church historically teaches in order to define the rule of faith. For what the church, at its best, teaches is precisely what the Scriptures teach."³ Here, Oden adopts a

¹See Congar, 20 ff.; 198-200. For a complete schematic account of the various distinctions in tradition according to Catholic theology see ibid., 307.

²Ibid., 20, 27. See n. 3 below for the meaning of the "rule of faith."

³Oden, The Living God, 344. Cf. Congar, who notes that "rule of faith" and "rule of truth" designate the doctrine taught by the church in accordance with what it received from the apostles. Nevertheless, he argues that those expressions "do not indicate a formal principle or criterion of truth, distinct from the truth itself, from the teaching, from what is transmitted" (28). Thus reception and transmission are made to coincide necessarily. For a discussion on the "co-inherence" of tradition and Scripture see the following: George H. Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959); Heiko Augustinus Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 361-422; Paul W. Shorey, "The Influence of the Biblicist Heresy on the Late Medieval Doctrine of Scripture and Tradition" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1987).
certain fluidity or continuity between reception and transmission that is quite prevalent in contemporary Catholic theology of tradition.¹

The fluidity between tradition's reception and transmission underlies the convergence between Catholics and Protestants on the question of tradition. On the Catholic side, there has been a gradual distancing from the two-source theory since Vatican II's Dei Verbum, while on the Protestant side, there is more and more a positive appraisal of tradition both as the transmission and actualizing of the biblical message.² Oden shares in this line of thought. Given his view of revelation, Scripture and tradition come into close proximity.

According to Oden, then, the nature of tradition allows it to play a vital, dynamic role without necessarily abandoning its enduring aspects.³ Perhaps Oden's understanding of the nature of tradition is best seen

¹Congar traces the roots of the identity or continuity between tradition's reception and transmission to J. B. Franzelin's De Defina Traditione et Scriptura (1890). "From him," writes Congar, "was taken the identity between active tradition and the rule of faith in the modern sense of the word" (Congar, 198).


³In After Modernity--What? Oden clearly distinguishes orthodoxy from heresy in the tradition.
against the background of Hegel's logic of history.¹ Like Hegel's dialectical logic, Oden's consensual orthodoxy implies a "conserving radicalism" which seeks the renewal of the Christian tradition.² This means that tradition has a dialectic structure of conserving and renewal. Oden can say that "only the conserver who asks how the tradition can be relevantly renewed is faithful to the tradition."³

The notions of development and progress are inherent in this understanding of the nature of tradition. Thus, when Oden affirms that traditions are refractions of the matrix of Scripture, he believes that each one of these refractions is new, "since historical experience is ever new."⁴ That which makes the apostolic teaching recognizable

¹Oden, Beyond Revolution, 62-68.
²Ibid., 67.
³Ibid., 68.
⁴Oden, The Living God, 337-338. A similar emphasis on the themes of subjectivity, progress, and action in the theology of tradition is noticed in the utterances of Vatican II. Avery Dulles discusses two points which bear this observation out from chapter 2 of Dei Verbum. First, tradition, seen as "the means of traditioning" is identified with the total life and praxis of the church. On "development" in tradition the document states: "This tradition which comes from the apostles progresses in the church under the assistance of the Holy Spirit. . . . Thus, as the centuries advance, the church constantly tends towards the fulness of divine truth, until the words of God reach their consummation in the church" (Dulles, The Craft of Theology, 94-95). For a discussion on development in tradition see Congar, 209-213; Anthony Meredith, The Theology of Tradition (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1971), 62-71; J. H. Newman, An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).
is the Spirit, by whose guidance also erroneous teachings are corrected through a process of historical ecumenical consent.²

The place of the Church in tradition is an integral part of this whole issue of the nature of tradition. For Oden, "the ekklesia is the place where Christ is becoming embodied in history."³ The church is the body of Christ, and this is "not merely a clever turn of phrase or a rhetorical device, but a vital relational reality."⁴ Thus Oden is careful to discuss not only the metaphorical logic of ecclesiology (i.e., Church as bride, flock, household of faith, etc.) but also the organic and incarnate logic of ecclesiology. This means that, not only is the body of Christ a vital relational reality, but it shares in the theandric analogy of the incarnation, with the Spirit as the soul of the church.⁵

Since the Spirit personally enlivens the church, there is a sense of personal reality pervading the vitality of this community that is beheld through her actions, liturgy, seasons, and celebrations. . . . Without

¹Oden, The Living God, 348.
²Ibid.
³Oden, Life in the Spirit, 287.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Ibid., 292.
ceasing to be the activity of human beings, the church is enlivened by and is the activity of God.¹

It may be helpful at this point to try to place Oden on the spectrum of options in contemporary theologies of traditions regarding the nature of tradition. It appears that Oden’s view on the nature of tradition lies closest to the view enunciated in Vatican II’s Dei Verbum. This view combines elements of the "coincidence view" of tradition with the "unfolding view" of tradition.²

¹Ibid., 293. Oden argues that this position should not be understood from a pantheistic premise by which God would be regarded as identical with the body or social or natural process. Nevertheless, the position inclines him very closely to a sacramental view of the church. Here is an important watershed between Catholics and Protestants. According to Congar, the fundamental difference between Catholics and Protestants has to do with their corresponding understanding of man’s spiritual relationship with God. Congar recognizes that for the Reformation the only certain, normative bond which links the church of today, and every believer in any age, to the unique facts of the apostles, is Holy Scripture. Catholicism, however, on the basis of the sapiential outlook of the Fathers, adopts a sacramental position that brings "historical continuity between the unique events . . . of the history of salvation" (Congar, 146-155). Thus Congar writes, "The gift of revelation and salvation made by God in Jesus Christ and by means of the apostles is the source of life in the church, in the history of this Church on earth, a life of which the Holy Spirit is the divinely efficacious principle. That is why an instituted magisterium founded on the unique and normative fact of revelation, ruled objectively by it, can, in its turn, be a rule of faith of the church in history" (ibid., 148). But for the risk of oversimplified formulas Congar would say that "for Catholicism, there is an ontological continuity and presence of the facts of revelation and redemption in the church" (ibid., 148-149).

²See A. N. S. Lane, "Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey," Vox Evangelica 9 (1975): 37-55. For a summary see Bauckham and Drewery, 118-124. A. N. S. Lane provides four classifications of the nature of tradition as it relates to Scripture. First, the
Use. After exploring the origin and nature of tradition in Oden, we need to understand how he uses tradition in his method. The combination of the "coincidence" and "unfolding" views on tradition by Oden points to his use of tradition. The elements from the "coincidence view" of tradition point to the need that Oden perceives in contemporary theology for multigenerational continuity and tradition-maintenance to be addressed in this discussion of the critical and apologetic tasks of theology. On the other hand, the elements of development from the "unfolding view of tradition" point to the need that Oden envisages for the gospel to acquire legitimacy and relevance.

"coincidence view" which is said to have prevailed from the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian to Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century "holds that the content of apostolic tradition coincides with the content of Scripture" (118). In its classic expression by Vincent of Lerins, Scripture, in this sense, is materially sufficient but formally insufficient (it needs authoritative interpretation); second, the "supplementary view," commonly known as the "two-source" theory, holds that Scripture is not only formally, but also materially insufficient. The full content of revelation is to be found in Scripture and unwritten apostolic tradition; third, the "ancillary view," which is the Protestant view, holds that tradition functions as an aid, but not a norm, for the interpretation of Scripture; fourth, the "unfolding view," where tradition is understood as a process by which the full meaning of the apostolic message is gradually unfolded. Oden's identification of church teaching with Scripture is the element that is closest to the coincidence view. However, he does not seem to draw the implication of the teaching authority of the magisterium drawn by Congar above.
in ever-new emergent historic situation,¹ as well as the need for the full embodiment of Christ in history.²

In other words, Oden uses elements of the coincidence view of tradition to justify his recovering of his Christian roots in the classical tradition while the elements of the unfolding view of revelation support his renewal of the tradition.

Role as source: What role does tradition play in Oden’s scheme of sources? In sum, tradition plays a magisterial role in the use of the sources to preserve on the one hand the apostolic witness and to ensure the renewal of the apostolic witness through the admission of new evidence without destroying the enduring aspects of that witness. In other words, the true apostolic witness may be recovered under the tutelage of tradition. This is the magisterial role to preserve. In playing the magisterial role in the renewal of the apostolic witness as Oden’s method envisages, tradition then guards against heterodoxy.

¹Cf. Pinnock, "How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology," 2-5. Pinnock seems to emphasize the interpretative value of tradition when he notes that "the richness of traditional wisdom can only deepen one’s own reflections and serve as a corrective to false moves in interpretation which from time to time threaten the truth" (4).

²Cf. Michael Polanyi, who writes: "A society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition" (Personal Knowledge [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], 53).
How does tradition fit in the overall plan of Oden's method? Methodologically, tradition plays a presiding role. Oden's epistemology prevents Scripture from being the definitive source. Neither reason nor experience can fulfill that role as will be seen shortly. At the same time, the epistemological effect of Oden's hermeneutical presuppositions is plausibility, corrigibility, and perspectival plurality with respect to knowledge of God (i.e., theology's goal). Since Scripture is stifled from playing a definitive role, and since reason and experience are incapable of performing that role, tradition is left as the least common denominator for determining truth. In other words, Oden's hermeneutical and teleological presuppositions process theological data in the crucible of tradition.

Experience

Origin. By experience, Oden intends the experiencing of the Word, Christ, as God's disclosure in history. But what are the specific objects of experience? In answering this question, we must note that Scripture is accorded a mediating role in the experiencing process. Thus Oden writes: "Scripture awakens and allows the passing on and reexperiencing of a vast range of experiences,
metaphors, symbols, and recollections of a historic community."\(^1\)

The grounding of religious experience in revelation, as understood historically by Oden, raises the possibility that religious experience may not be obtained only from Scripture and tradition. Since for Oden revelation "includes every manifestation of God to human consciousness, reason, conscience, and historical awareness,"\(^2\) it would be correct to infer that Oden shares the contemporary trend of recovering present experience in its full social and political dimensions as foundational for theology.\(^3\) This means that experience includes culture and politics, and therefore, not necessarily supernatural experience. Furthermore, this discussion on ontology implies that Christ may be experienced not only in Scripture, but in historical processes and events and in the conscience of the individual. The following discussion on the nature of experience in Oden will strengthen this observation.

\(^1\)Ibid., 338. Cf. David Tracy’s classification of Scripture as a classic in Analogical Imagination, 99 ff.

\(^2\)Ibid., 18.

Nature. In the foregoing discussion, I have outlined the origin of religious experience according to Oden. Presently, one needs to ask the question regarding the nature of religious experience. What is the nature of the religious experience that should count as a source of theological reflection? What is the structure of this experience? In this section, I try to answer these pertinent questions with particular reference to Oden. As a preliminary exercise to undertaking this task, a brief theoretical conceptualization of experience in general will be helpful.

In his insightful book The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology, Donald L. Gelpi, who has been noted as "undoubtedly emerging as one of the leading philosophical...

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1This question is significant since the term "experience" is employed in a variety of senses. In his provocative book, The Turn to Experience in Contemporary Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 2-3, Donald L. Gelpi outlines the various senses in which the term experience is used. First, the term is used non-technically to express the wisdom that comes from long-term exposure to some reality model of procedure or problem. Second, it is used, as in the case of medieval philosophers, for the kind of knowledge yielded by "the powers of sense." Another philosophical use of the word restricts it to the "how" of experience to include sensations, emotions, imagination, judgments, etc., as in John Dewey, Experience and Nature (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 1-39. Other philosophers contrast experience with understanding, judgment, and decision. Here experience designates all uncritical cognition as in Lonergan, Method in Theology, 3-25. According to Gelpi, the broadest philosophical use of experience includes the "what" and "how" of experience, thus making a metaphysical category as in Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality (New York: Free Press, 1963), 167.
theologians of our day,"¹ provides two main structural classifications of the nature of human experience in general, namely, a di-polar construct of experience versus a triadic construct of experience.² The di-polar concept of experience is based on cognitive theories which classify the cognitive processes as either perception or conception.³ This general di-polar classification of cognition corresponds with empiricism and rationalism respectively, and according to Josiah Royce both agree on the dual classification of the possible cognitive processes as either perception or conception.⁴

A triadic construct of experience, however, is based on a cognition theory which goes beyond the dual classification of the cognitive process as either perception or cognition. Charles Pierce and Josiah Royce are among


²In this classification, Gelpi is following the philosophical works of Charles S. Pierce and Josiah Royce in their philosophical explorations on the nature of cognition. See, for example, Josiah Royce, The Problem of Christianity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 273-296.

³Ibid., 277. Perception and conception as cognitive processes may be differentiated by their characteristic objects. According to Royce, "the object of perception is a datum of some sort, a thing, or . . . a change, or whatever else we may be able immediately to apprehend. The object of conception is an universal of some sort, a general or abstract character, a type, a quality, or some complex object based upon such universals" (ibid., 281).

⁴Ibid., 278.
those who seek to develop a triadic cognitive theory.¹ The triadic construct conceives of a process which is neither perception nor conception, but which "at least aims to be cognitive."² Here, a third category of object of cognition is envisaged which is neither a thing, nor a universal, but "a process which goes on in the mind, or, finally, is a sign or expression whereby some mind manifests its existence and its processes."³ Royce calls this process, interpretation,⁴ and shows that it is a relation which involves three terms (interpreter, object—the person or the meaning or the text—which is interpreted, and the person to whom the interpretation is addressed), unlike the dyadic process of perception or conception.⁵ The significance of interpretation as cognitive process is that, according to


²Royce, 281.

³Ibid. Pierce understands this process as the interaction between three forms of human reason which he distinguished as abduction, deduction, and induction. On the basis of this conception of human reasoning, Pierce concluded that rational thinking cannot advance except in the context of a dynamic interplay between thought and action in the process of inquiry (Pierce, 19-26; cf. Gelpi, 29-39).

⁴Royce, 281.

⁵Ibid., 287. Perception and conception, according to Royce, consist merely by "naming two terms,—persons, or other objects,—and by then telling what dyadic relation exists between one of these two and the other" (ibid.).
both Pierce and Royce, the interpretation itself is a **sign** which calls for further interpretation. Royce compares the dyadic construct of perception and conception with the triadic construct of interpretation, and shows that the latter involves a social process.¹

Gelpi, depending on the insights of Pierce and Royce, argues that the di-polar interpretation of experience transforms it into such a purely subjective process that it lacks the categories to interpret the social dimension of experience adequately.² On the other hand, the "irreducibly

¹"Perception has its natural terminus in some object perceived. . . . Conception is contended . . . with defining the universal type, or ideal form which chances to become an object of somebody’s thought. In order to define a new universal, one needs a new act of thought whose occurrence seems, in so far, an arbitrary additional cognitive function. Thus both perception and conception are, so to speak, self-limiting processes. . . . But interpretation is not only an essentially social process but also a process which, when once initiated, can be terminated only by an external and arbitrary interruption. . . . interpretation lives in a world which is endlessly richer than the realm of perception. For its discoveries are constantly renewed by the inexhaustible resources of our social relations" (Royce, 290).

²Ibid. In Gelpi’s view, Kantian epistemology epitomizes the di-polar construct of human cognition and experience. Besides, the "Charybdis of Kantian logic" surrounds and informs Western philosophy to the present time. Furthermore, Kantian epistemology affects a wide spectrum of theological reflections from Edward Schillebeeckx, through liberation theology, process theology and transcendental Thomism (Rahner and Lonergan). Gelpi classes all these theologies as founded on a di-polar construct of experience and criticizes them on the basis of the philosophy of Charles Sanders Pierce and Josiah Royce. According to Gelpi, Pierce correctly criticizes Kant for his failure to distinguish three forms of reasoning that the rational mind employs: abductive, or hypothetical reasoning; deductive, or predictive reasoning; and inductive
The social and symbolic character of human life can be accounted for only by a triadic construct of experience. Only a triadic construct of experience, according to Gelpi, adequately accounts for the entire range of human rational thought and activity. This is because in a triadic construct of experience, events signify, that is, they have a dynamic relational structure, where "instead of validating reasoning. The result of this failure is that "Kant's transcendental method formulates an unverified hypothesis about how the human mind works and then presents it as an induction, as a validated hypothesis, while calling it a transcendental deduction" (31).

1Ibid., 36.

According to Gelpi, the appeal of the triadic construct of experience lies in its coherence by avoiding dualisms that have traditionally plagued western philosophy. First, a triadic construct of experience avoids the spirit-matter dualism by replacing the metaphysical terms "spirit" and "matter" with experiential language of relationships. Second, a triadic construct of experience "avoids operational dualism by refusing to define some faculties as essentially spiritual and others as organic." Rather, "it portrays the growth of consciousness as the acquisition of increasingly complex patterns of perception and of interpretation" (137). Third, a triadic construct of experience avoids subjectivism and individualism in three ways. "First, it conceives each human self as relational and social in its intrinsic constitution. Second, it asserts that individuals achieve personal identity in part by appropriating the tradition of the communities to which they belong. Third, a triadic construct of experience insists that individuals come to full adulthood by critical reflection on any inadequacies in their community's received wisdom and by commitment to collaborating with others to correct those inadequacies" (137-138). Finally, according to Gelpi, experience viewed as triadic "avoids time-eternity dualism by portraying God as the supreme exemplification of experience, as an eternal process within which the spatio-temporal process develops" (138).

3Ibid., 14.
consisting in a solipsistic Cartesian (or Kantian) meditation, rational thinking consists in ongoing social dialogue. \(^1\) Such an ongoing dialogue requires a shared inquiry\(^2\) which acknowledges a fallibilistic interpretation of human reason.\(^3\)

On the basis of the foregoing brief discussion, one needs to ask which structure of religious experience accords best with Oden’s thought. It is evident that the trend of Oden’s thinking inclines him closer to the triadic understanding of experience. As noted above the triadic conception of experience involves three terms: the interpreter, the object of interpretation, and the person to whom the interpretation is addressed. In Oden’s thought, the individual involved in Christian experiencing stands amidst a complex relation of himself, the Christian texts, and the community to which his experiencing is responsive. Experiencing the Word in Oden is not a frozen interpretive activity between the Christian and the text of Scripture which constitutes the sole source for that experience. Experience is processive in that it enables "the personal

\(^1\)As pertaining to truth, Gelpi observes that "if we hope to understand the truth, we need to commit ourselves to a community of truth seekers and by learning from one another’s experience and insight advance toward the best explanation of events that we can formulate" (ibid., 35). Cf. Oden’s notion of convergence of plausibility.

\(^2\)Ibid., 38-40.

\(^3\)Ibid., 35.
appropriation of God's mercy in actual, interpersonal relationship.\textsuperscript{1} Hence experience in Oden is a dynamic, vital activity which may be subject to continuous interpretation, within the context of the worshipping community. In fact, Oden’s view of tradition as dynamic, vital, and developmental is inconceivable without a corresponding dynamic personal experiencing of the Word within the individual experiences of members in the worshipping community. According to Oden, Christian experiencing of the Word occurs most powerfully in corporate celebration where the corporate, social memory is congruently integrated within the individual's own feelings.\textsuperscript{2}

Role as source. What place does experience occupy in the array of sources in Oden's method? Oden observes that "experience is to the individual as tradition is to the historical church."\textsuperscript{3} It serves to validate Scripture and tradition to the individual although Oden maintains that

\textsuperscript{1}It is implicit to note that, in Oden, tradition and experience have a close relationship. He observes: "It is misleading to pit tradition against experience, for tradition is simply the memory of this vast arena of social and historical experiencing. There is profound affinity and synchronicity between corporate tradition and personal experience: one is historical-social-ecclesial and the other is personal-individuated-unique" (Oden, \textit{The Living God}, 338).

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., 339.
this does not imply that personal experience may
unilaterally judge and dismiss Scripture and tradition. The
difficulty with this role that personal experience plays is
how to make it operational. There seems to be a built-in
tension between the role of experience on the one hand and
that of Scripture and tradition on the other hand. On the
one hand Oden insists that personal experience is evaluated
amid the living, worshipping community, yet he is also
persuaded that "the most convincing source of truth is that
which corresponds with the rest of one's experience."¹

The comments above relate to the role of experience
in receiving Scripture and tradition. However, experience
is structurally related to Oden's method. Experience is
related to Oden's hermeneutical presuppositions by way of
revelation. Experience mediates revelation in such a way
that, in Oden, one could infer that revelation is
existential.² The revelation-inspiration process in Oden is
construed in such a way that what is reported in Scripture
about the Christ-event and other revelatory historical
events are not revelation in themselves, but pointers to
revelation.

¹Ibid.

²See comment on n. 2, p. 135, where Oden in a
personal interview with the writer acknowledges that Barth's
view of revelation accords with early classical Christian
teaching.
Experience in Oden, however, loses its individualistic feature since, as I have shown, it is interpreted triadically. In other words, for Oden what is ultimately important is not the individual's experience of the Christ-event or of that event through texts, symbols, etc. All of these are diadic experiencing, i.e., between the individual and Christ's (for the New Testament writers) or the individual and the texts or symbols representing the Christ-event (for subsequent generations of Christians). Oden, however, conceives experience triadically involving the individual, the object of experience, i.e., the person, or text, and the Christian community to whom interpretation is addressed. In this way individual experience merges with tradition which becomes a most significant element in Oden's method. Experience, therefore, in Oden's method, informs both his hermeneutical and material presuppositions.

Reason

A word of caution regarding Oden's use of reason as a source of theology is necessary at this introductory level. First, as we noted at the beginning of this section on the data of theology, Oden uses the term "source" in a very loose way to encompass any means by which "divine address" is conveyed to humanity and an understanding of God is thus possible. Having adopted such an open-ended definition of "sources of theology," Oden goes ahead to identify reason as a source of theology.
Nature. In this discussion on Oden's hermeneutical condition, we examined his understanding of the nature of reason as an epistemological concept. Here we are concerned about the nature of reason as a source of theology. Given Oden's open definition of sources of theology, my concern here is to show how theological reason, which in Oden is essentially historical, aids the Christian community's reflection on God. In this sense, reason may be seen as having the nature of a sieve which is historically equipped "to sort out the legitimate claims of alleged revelation in the light of whatever one has already learned about God through comprehensive coherence."\(^1\) Given this nature of reason as a source of theology, it has several uses.

Use. The capacity of reason to receive revelation is one of five classical reasons that Oden gives to explain why reason is required in revelation, and for that matter, theology. According to Oden, the five classical explanations of why reason is required to receive revelation are: to decide whether or when revelation has occurred, to reveal reason's own limitations, to interpret and apply revealed truth, and to transmit the meaning of revelation.

On the reception of revelation, it must be remembered that revelation may proceed from history or nature. However, since revelation is defined by Oden in

\(^1\)Oden, The Living God, 388.
personalistic terms as God's self-disclosure in human experience, the distinction between general and special revelation almost disappears. The basic role of reason in the reception of revelation is to facilitate the apprehension of truth. In Oden's words, "reason helps faith to understand the content of what is to be believed." Oden does not show exactly how reason is able to receive revelation. This is rather disappointing, especially because Oden shares the view that revelation is not "primarily" the imparting of information.

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See Paul Avis, "Does Natural Theology Exist?" Theol. 87 (1984): 431-437. Avis argues that the traditional separation of natural and revealed theology is based on a differentiation of one or more of three criteria: the source, mode, and content of religious truth. On the question of mode, Avis argues that the acceptance of a personalist understanding of revelation as God's self-disclosure necessarily implies the abandonment of a propositional view of revelation as the communication of divine truths requiring our assent.

Oden, The Living God, 392. It is interesting to compare Oden's classical listing of reason's functions with other accounts. David A. Pallin, "Reason in Relation to Scripture and Tradition," in Scripture, Tradition and Reason, ed. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery, 216-217, gives the fourfold role of reason in the Middle Ages (including the Reformation and Counter-Reformation) as follows: (1) To elucidate and draw out the implications of the truths laid down as premises for correct understanding in the texts of Scripture and tradition; (2) to reconcile conflicts between the contents of Scripture and tradition; (3) to show the need for revelation and dependence on the authorities who provide it; (4) to show that certain truths may be ascertained without the aid of divine revelation.

For a suggestion on how revelation may convey information without proposition, see Basic Mitchell and Maurice Wiles, "Does Christianity Need a Revelation? A Discussion," Theol. 83 (1980): 110-112.
Reason's reception of revelation is only a first step. Reason must also decide whether revelation has actually occurred or not. The decision whether revelation has occurred or not is based on communal reasoning. This is done through the larger process of comprehensive coherence.\(^1\) In this role, reason judges the evidences of religious claims to revelation. Furthermore, Oden states that the evidence must be fitting to the truth purported—historical truth requires historical evidence, truths of nature require empirical, scientific evidence, truths in the moral sphere require moral evidence.\(^2\)

The reception and acknowledgment of revelation by reason do not exhaust reason's role in revelation. It must also discover the implications of the revelation. Reason does this historically, i.e., the implications must be discovered in a particular community's historical context and expressed in its own language.\(^3\)

\(^1\)Oden, *The Living God*, 392.

\(^2\)Notice that reason functions evidentially as in a postmodern epistemological framework. Besides, as Pallin observes, "once reason is held to be needed to authenticate revelation, whether in Scripture or tradition, it is reason and not revelation that is likely to finish up at the final authority" (Pallin, "Reason in Relation," 216).

\(^3\)Oden observes: "It is by reason that the believer learns to utilize analogies in the service of the truth, to make observations from nature and history, and to remove doubts by setting forth reasonable arguments" (Oden, *The Living God*, 393).
Finally, reason functions in the transmission of revelation, a role which involves, among others, the correlation of faith's wisdom "with the insights of philosophy, history, political ethics, psychology, and other sciences."\(^1\)

Elsewhere, Oden organizes these five roles of reason into three categories: organic role (assisting faith's reflection upon itself in the right use of logic, grammar, rhetoric, induction, deductive, etc.); apologetic role (stating reasons for faith's conclusions in the midst of doubt); polemical (assisting faith in the correction of error by argument).\(^2\) In all of these, Oden warns about the tendency in reason towards "egocentric distortion," i.e., "its affectation of directorship, or its magisterial use, as normative and decisive in divine things."\(^3\)

**Role.** Reason has a dual role in its relation with the rest of the sources of theology. First, reason has the role of acknowledging revelation when it has occurred. Since the other sources in Oden's method may convey revelation, reason stands in a magisterial position with respect to affirming whether revelation has truly occurred. The second role that reason performs in relation to the

\(^1\)Ibid., 394.
\(^2\)Ibid., 395.
\(^3\)Ibid., 396.
other sources is the transmission of revelation. This is basically a systematic function which reason performs based on the insights from the various sources in correlation with faith. We have already noted Oden’s caution regarding reason’s tendency to "egocentric distortion" and "directorship," yet, in spite of Oden’s caveat, it seems true to observe, in concluding this section on reason, that reason exerts an excessive influence in Oden’s method, although its excesses may be curbed only by the community’s consensus historically constituted. Thus, once again, we see that reason is brought to subsist in tradition. It must be recollected that tradition for Oden is a vital, dynamic reality.

The fact that reason is made to subsist in tradition is consistent with Oden’s view that theological reasoning is historical reasoning. But this conclusion is significant for Oden’s method and theology. Similarly, the other aspects of Oden’s material conditioning method have implications for the task of theology that must be pointed out presently in the summary and concluding remarks.

Summary and Conclusion

In both the understanding of Scripture and tradition in Oden, history acquires a significant determining role. Scripture is conceived primarily from the historical processes by which it became composed, authorized, and
authoritative. Tradition, on the other hand, is understood as a development of history, albeit Spirit enlivened, yet with a dialectic structure.

The historical view of Scripture makes it essentially a witness to God's self-disclosure at a particular point in time and space as a part of a continuing stream of divine self-disclosure. In this sense, Scripture is unique only by virtue of its chronological standing in the stream, that is, primary in time. On the other hand, tradition understood in the dynamic, historical, and developmental sense envisages a broader spectrum of the stream of divine self-disclosure in history, so as to make Scripture a sub-set of tradition. True, Scripture funds tradition, yet it becomes necessarily an organic part of the ongoing tradition. This means that Scripture must not only impact the subsequent tradition, but that Scripture must also be impacted by the tradition since Scripture shares in the essence of the ongoing tradition. It is in this sense that we can understand Oden's view noted above that traditions are refractions of the matrix of Scripture.

These observations have significant implications for the relative use of Scripture and tradition in Oden's method and theology. Since both Scripture and tradition are historical products, they may not be understood except within the framework of contemporary historical and critical consciousness. This means, in addition, that Scriptural
materials are historically conditioned and may not be interpreted apart from their connection with tradition. The historical view of Scripture, therefore, has the effect of making it subservient to tradition as well as accommodating it to historical criticism. In this sense, Oden's view of Scripture, far from deriving from the early theological consensus, resonates very well with postmodern epistemology. Thus we see that his view of Scripture and tradition is influenced by his postmodern epistemological presuppositions.

We may observe that Oden adopts a view of experience whose origin, structure, and use fits his overall pattern of understanding revelation, Scripture, and tradition.

Two questions need to be answered at this point to underscore the relevance of this discussion on Oden's thought on religious experience for theology. What is the theological significance for recognizing experience as a source for theology? and, Why is it important for Oden to construe experience in a "triadic" manner in his method?

On the first question, it appears that contemporary theology intends to purge theology of its confessional and so-called authoritarian impulses. It appears that Christian theologians cannot be exclusively concerned with an analysis of conceptual expressions of earlier experiences. The emphasis on contemporary experience, therefore, has a
"hermeneutical significance with regard to the content of
Christian experience and knowledge: that is, they help us to
understand that content."¹ Oden’s recognition of experience
as a source for theological reflection mirrors the
contemporary need to validate the Christian message by
contemporary personal experience.² His construal of
experience triadically, however, serves his postmodernist,
pluralistic framework. Only a triadic construct of
experience can account for Oden’s ecumenical view that
Christ’s presence is experienced sacramentally, by the
liturgical traditions, ecstatically by the charismatic
traditions, morally inspiring by the liberal
traditions, as ground of social experiment by the
pietistic traditions, as doctrinal teacher by the
scholastic traditions, as sanctifying power of persons
and society by the Greek Orthodox tradition, as grace
perfecting nature by the Roman Catholic tradition, as
word of Scripture by the evangelical tradition.³

¹Edward Schillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel, eds.,
Revelation and Experience (New York: Seabury Press, 1979),
viii. See also Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, 43-44.
According to Tracy, it is imperative for Christian theology
to show adequacy and relevance to contemporary human
experiences. In his view, this demand is forced upon the
Christian theologian not only by the authentic aspects of
modernity or for contemporary relevance, but also "by the
universalist, existential assumptions of the New Testament
self-understanding itself" (ibid.).

²"The most convincing source of truth is that which
corresponds with the rest of one’s experience, and which
validates the meaningfulness of one’s personal history. Any
truth that is arrived at by circumventing personal
experience is likely to remain somewhat implausible to the
individual. . . . A truth that has not become a truth_for me
. . . is not likely to bear weight in sustaining other
conclusions in the study of God" (Oden, The Living God,
339).

³Oden, Agenda for Theology, 112.
In other words, only a triadic construct of experience can accommodate a plurality of viewpoints.¹ God is experienced by all at a primordial level in historical processes and human conscience, but these experiences are expressed in different ways.

Interconnection of Conditions of Method

We reflected briefly above on the connection between Oden’s hermeneutical and teleological conditions. Now that this discussion on the material condition is complete, it may be helpful to delineate in a general way the interconnections among the conditions of Oden’s method. Since we have already reflected on the hermeneutical-teleological relation, we will next examine the hermeneutical-material relation.

Oden’s hermeneutical presuppositions, as I have shown, emphasize history in revelation and reason as epistemological concepts. History implies dynamism, vitality, and development. Although Oden’s ontology incorporates the timelessness of the divine essence (i.e., God), the system of Oden’s method, namely, the Christ-event as the definitive divine self-disclosure (revelation), practically neutralizes any absolute, immutable elements in

¹Royce remarks that interpretation as a triadic construct of experience demands “at every point, an infinite series of mutual interpretations in order to express what even the very least conversational effort, the least attempt to find our way in the life that we would interpret, involves” (290).
his hermeneutical presuppositions. These hermeneutical considerations have significant implications for Oden’s material condition in his method. They explain why Scripture is not revelation but a record or witness to a historical revelation. For the same reason, tradition is seen less as a depositum but more as a vital, dynamic, ongoing reality of the Christian community’s life. When I explained that experience is understood triadically in Oden’s method, I was reflecting the same outworking of his hermeneutical presupposition on his material condition (experience). As far as reason is concerned, I have suggested how history as an underlying hermeneutical idea in Oden may even be constitutive of reason’s nature, and hence influence its use as a source for theological reflection.

How do the teleological and material conditions interrelate? The interconnection between these two conditions of Oden’s method finds its clearest expression in the technical analysis of the Vincentian method, i.e., method as activity. In other words, as we see Oden undertake the necessary tasks of his method to attain the goal of theology by the use of the various data of theology, we see how the teleological and material conditions impact each other. I have devoted the last section of this analysis in this chapter to this purpose.
Technical Description of the Vincentian Method

So far, we have examined Oden's method from the point of view of its hermeneutical, teleological, and material conditions. Although these conditions are fundamental to the structure of his method, it is impossible to conceive of the Vincentian method, or for that matter any other method, apart from the activity which distinguishes it as a distinct method.

The discussion in chapter 3 pointed to the concept of activity as the fourth component in the conditional structure of method. The theoretical discussion on method as activity yielded certain key points that need to be applied to this discussion of the instrumental condition of Oden's method. First, method's activity is inseparable from the method as such. This means that in this discussion of the activities or tasks of Oden's method, we need to see (1) how the latter are connected to the other conditions of the method, and (2) that activity is methodic which seeks to further the goal or the purpose that the method seeks to bring to completion. The implication of this point for this discussion is that only tasks that seek to further Oden's teleological condition are relevant for the discussion. Third, for activity to be methodic, it must be recognizable so as to be repeatable. For this discussion, the last point demands clarification of the repetitive nature of Oden's
methodic activities. The three points outlined above will be the focus of the discussion in this section.

Tasks of the Vincentian Method

In the discussion on the teleological condition in Oden's method, we noted that the goal of theology in his method is the apprehension of the knowledge of God as known in the Christian community. The successful completion of this goal involves certain tasks. These tasks are already evident in Oden's description of systematic theology. Oden defines systematic theology as the discipline seeking to formulate Christian teaching in an orderly, sequential, plausible way that is accountable to Scripture and Tradition and meaningful to contemporary experience.

Oden's definition of systematic theology incorporates theology's threefold attempt to apprehend, defend, and self-regulate the faith. These three attempts

1Randy Maddox points out that the determination of the goal of theology implies certain tasks that are reflected in a set of questions regarding the relation of theology and faith. "Does theology merely explicate faith? Does it engage in critical reflection? Or . . . does it try to ground faith?" (Toward an Ecumenical Fundamental Theology, 104).

2Oden, The Living God, 328. Notice that three tasks of theology are already evident in this definition. Constructively, the theological task is to formulate the faith orderly, sequentially, and plausibly while apologetically theology must be meaningful to contemporary experience. The critical function is taken care of by the phrase that Christian teaching must be accountable to Scripture and Tradition. See also, E. Ashby Johnson, The Crucial Task of Theology (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958), 60 ff. According to Johnson, the constructive task provides
represent theology's constructive, apologetic, and critical tasks respectively. The discussion will take each of these tasks and analyze them along the lines suggested above.

Constructive Task

We begin by asking the question, What is the constructive task? What does one do in this task? Oden sees the constructive task of theology as a near synonym for systematic theology, which is basically the formulation of Christian teaching. Oden adds, however, that in the constructive task, the focus is put on "creative reflection in each varied sociocultural-historical situation." Evidently, the task at hand, here, is one of providing constructional formulations of Christian teaching, but doing it in a way that creatively reflects the sociocultural-

the church with constructional formulations through which the church apprehends and communicates its message. On the other hand, the apologetic aim enables the church to speak to the secular world in a fashion which can be appreciated and understood by the critic. Since the apologetic task often implies dialogue with contemporary epistemological reflection, several attempts are being made at this level to determine the contemporary task of theology. Bernard Lonergan's Method in Theology, David Tracy's Blessed Rage for Order, and Wolfhart Pannenberg's Theology and the Philosophy of Science all represent this apologetic, epistemological reflection on the task of theology. Finally, the critical task, according to Johnson, is the tool by which theology is able to distinguish "good" theology from "bad" theology (E. Ashby Johnson, 65). See also Cobb, "Theological Data and Method," 213-214.

1See n. 2, p. 212, above.

2Oden, The Living God, 368.

3Ibid.
historical situation. These teachings enable the Christian community to apprehend the God who is known in the community.

How does one go about doing this task? Oden himself does not tell us what steps to follow in the constructive task. Yet, throughout his Systematic Theology and other works, a few simple steps are discernible. Generally, Oden begins with a subject matter that he divides into sub-topics. Some of these sub-topics are readily recognized as loci in traditional consensus while others are his own logical creations. Next, under each sub-topic, Oden states propositions usually in a dogmatic manner, citing authorities to buttress his propositions without necessarily discussing them. The authorities cited generally come from the predetermined consensual Fathers and Councils. In this way, the consensus of the first five centuries of Christian history is brought to bear on Oden's constructive task.

In citing authorities, Oden asks for the weighting of references in a manner which he compares to a pyramid of

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1 For an example of where he explicitly sets forth an example of how, what he calls "classic exegetical reasoning functions systematically," one does not discern any definite steps, see Oden, "The Long Journey Home," 87-92.

2 Oden is of the view that "theological argument does well to view itself modestly as merely an introduction to its annotations. In my systematic efforts I earnestly wish more attention to be paid to notes than text, more to primary sources than my arrangement of them, more to the substance of the references than to the particular frame in which one observer beholds, places or organizes them" (ibid., 80).
sources. The pyramid has Scripture as the foundational base, followed by the early Christian writers as the supporting trunk, then medieval writers followed by "centrist" Reformation writers at the narrowing center, "and more recent interpreters at the smaller, tapering apex, but only those who grasp and express the anteceding mind of the believing historic church."\(^1\) Furthermore, Oden notes that most points of consensual Christian exegesis were reasonably formulated by the fifth century, therefore, "upon these we do well to again train our attention."\(^2\)

How does the constructive task outlined above relate to the other conditions of Oden's method? Oden's constructive task is clearly related to his teleological condition. For Oden, the goal of theology is to apprehend the God who is known in the Christian community. The procedure of citing positions taken by historic Christian councils and creeds on issues, as well as positions taken by significant Christian writers, appears fitted to his goal. Pragmatically, this process resembles a judicial approach of

\(^1\)Ibid., 81.

\(^2\)Ibid. On the principal consensual exegetes of classic theology, Oden points out that he does not hesitate to quote nonconsensual exegetes like Origen, Tertullian, and Novation on points where they "confirm . . . refined consensual views" (ibid., 82).
summoning credible witnesses to testify to the truth of what they have known.  

The constructive task also incorporates Oden's hermeneutical presuppositions. The trust which he reposes in the consensus of the classic tradition points to Oden's emphasis on history in his view of revelation. Finally, Oden's material condition relates to the constructive task both in the choice of "textuary" and its weighting, which shows Oden's emphasis on Scripture as consensually understood in tradition.

Is the constructive task repeatable in a consistent manner? Formally, the procedure may be repeatable, but materially some difficult issues remain unclear, which will

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1 Comparing theology's constructive effort to legal inquiry Oden writes, "As legal inquiry proceeds from texts, testimony, and precedents, so the study of God deals with consensual precedents, with texts and testimonies of eyewitnesses to God's self-disclosure, and with consensual precedents that interpret these events. . . . Christian teaching characteristically appeals to many different levels of evidence—historical testimony, moral awareness, life experience, the social history of a people, and the history of revelation—in order to establish a convergence of plausibility along different and complementary lines" (ibid., 353).

Oden applies the notion of comprehensive coherence to theological reasoning and observes that "the search for comprehensive coherence is the attempt to grasp of see as most probably true that proposed solution to a problem which is on the whole supported by the greatest net weight of evidence from all quarters—deductive and inductive reasoning, logic and scientific method, historical reasoning, Scripture, and tradition. It is a centered intuitive act of drawing together of insights or data from widely varied resources and searching for their interrelated implicit meaning or convergence of plausibility" (ibid., 385).
be taken up in the evaluation below. Similarly, we may ask whether Oden is able to do this task creatively as his understanding of constructive theology purports. The answer to this question would seem to raise difficulties, which will be noted in the evaluation.

The Apologetic Task

Oden understands the apologetic task as a bridge-building activity between the community of faith and those outside the faith by clarifying to the latter how faith reasons about itself.¹ As before, we must ask the question pointedly: What is the apologetic task, and what does one do in this task? Evidently, the apologetic task involves the process of clarifying the Christian faith in a way that can be appreciated and understood by contemporary persons outside the faith.

How does one go about doing this task? Again, we can only make deductions from Oden's practice.² Generally the procedure involves at least two steps: first, Oden

¹"Apologetic theology is that theology which wishes to speak especially to those standing outside the Christian community, to provide clarification to nonfaith concerning how faith reasons about itself amid particular historical challenges. Apologetics seeks to build a bridge between the community of faith and its intellectual, moral, and ideological alternatives" (Oden, The Living God, 368).

²These deductions are made after observing Oden's treatment of topics that appear to be in tension with contemporary scientific and cosmological viewpoints. Included in these topics are creation, eschatology, Christology (e.g., incarnation), and miracles.
recollects the classical viewpoint, as he perceives the consensus understood it. In the second step, Oden clarifies in logical steps the internal consistency of the classical position as reflected by the consensus of the first five centuries. In some instances, as I will show, this second step involves what amounts to a reinterpretation of the consensus in terms that are compatible with scientific categories.

The first step involves the constructive task as outlined above. The second step in Oden is an apologetic procedure that resembles Anselm's approach as in Cur Deus Homo, with the following significant distinction. While Anselm argues simply by rigorous logic, Oden weaves statements of classical consensual exegetes with his logic. In this process, Oden uses classical exegetes both to raise questions and answer them.¹

The doctrine of creation presents an instance where Oden undertakes what amounts to a reinterpretation of the consensual construction and casts it in a contemporary scientific light. Oden does this, after starting the consensual view, by observing that the Scriptural account is

¹See, for example, Oden's discussion on the incarnation, The Word of Life, 93 ff. Among the issues that Oden discusses to bring clarity to the topic are: why it is fitting that God became human, why Christ was born of a woman, what it means to be eternally begotten, etc. Throughout this exercise, Oden seeks to show the internal logical necessity of the classical Christian teaching on Christ's incarnation.
in the nature of drama. He is, therefore, able to deal with some aspects of the creation account metaphorically and not as a literal account.¹

How does the apologetic task relate to the other conditions of Oden’s method? Oden’s treatment of the doctrine of creation brings to focus the complex interrelationship among the conditions of his method. He is able to treat the Scriptural account as metaphorical because of his hermeneutical presuppositions in which revelation does not impart supernatural timeless truths. Thus, Oden’s hermeneutical presupposition (i.e., his view of revelation as history) impacts his material condition (i.e., Scripture seen not as containing supernaturally revealed timeless truths, but in this case a metaphor) and now conditions his method as activity (i.e., how the creation account is reconstructed to accommodate a scientific worldview).

Is the apologetic task consistently repeatable? Formally, the apologetic task may be repeatable when the procedure is restricted to clarifying the inner logical consistency of Christian faith. When Oden tries to deal with issues which run counter to contemporary experience, Ô

¹Oden writes, "The natural emergence of the cosmic geological, vegetative and animal spheres can remain a matter of scientific investigation. The creation narratives do not pretend to describe in empirical detail, objectively, descriptively, or unmetaphorically, the way in which the world came into being; rather they declare the awesome primordial fact that the world is radically dependent on the generosity, wisdom and help of God, the insurmountably good and powerful one" (The Living God, 233).
however, the lack of a clear principle of correlation makes it possible to repeat the procedure consistently. But these are issues which will be taken up more fully in the evaluation below.

The Critical Task

The critical task concerns itself with the issue of orthodoxy and heresy. Oden writes that "Orthodoxy stands in an intrinsic relation with heresy . . . where there is no distinction between Christian truth and falsehood parading as Christian truth, there can be no Christian teaching." The task at hand, therefore, is the process of distinguishing what is true Christian teaching from what is not.

How does one go about doing this task? Oden spells out clearly the test for correct Christian teaching. "Nothing is required of any believer other than that which is revealed by God himself through Scripture as necessary to salvation, as propounded consensually by the Christian community as an article of faith reliably received by common ecumenical consent."

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1In David Tracy's view, all theologies which seek to incorporate new insights into the tradition must have a principle of correlation (Analogical Imagination, 99).

2Oden, After Modernity, 160. Nevertheless, Oden is also aware that the issue regarding heresy is an unpopular one. He notes that "the leading candidate for 'most ugly issue in theology today' is unquestionably heresy" (ibid.).

3Oden, The Living God, 344.
The significance of the consensus of the first five centuries of Christian theology in the critical task is quite evident from the above statement. What eventually counts as God's revelation must have been propounded and received consensually to be so. Yet, even a formal definition of Christian teaching is not easily achieved. For Oden two disciplines are required in this task: polemics and irenics. Polemics defines the border of true Christian belief, while irenics looks for deeper consensus within the community of faith. Thus, there is a boundary and a center; and all that lies between the center and the boundary is doctrinally acceptable.

1"A postcritical irenics will concern itself with the cohesive centre of the tradition, while an alert, adept, creative postcritical polemical orthodoxy will concern itself with the circumference and try accurately and in good spirit to monitor the boundaries" (Oden, After Modernity, 173). See also, idem, "The Real Reformers Are Traditionalists," Christianity Today, February 1998, 45. Oden states that "the tent of the consensus fidelium is vast and multicultural but not lacking boundaries" (ibid.).

2Oden writes, "The Christian tradition has an unusually wide circumference without ceasing to have a single, unifying centre. It is Christ's living presence that unites a diverse tradition, yet that single centre is experienced in richly different ways. . . . The study of the tradition is like looking through a magnificent spectroscope. The colors are strikingly different, just as Christian perceptions of the living Christ have been abundantly diverse. . . . It therefore becomes mean and restrictive to assume testily that only one color finally is the most beautiful or permanently normative for all the rest" (After Modernity, 176-177). Thomas Oden writes: "The debate about whether heresy can be defined is a struggle to specify margins, the legitimate boundaries of the worshipping community" ("Why We Believe in Heresy," Christianity Today, March 1996, 13).
Procedurally, the definition of correct teaching involves two moves. First, ascertain whether the teaching coheres with the deeper center of the tradition (irenics). Second, establish whether in the particular tonal variation of the faith, a particular expression of it has crossed the boundary. Oden shows instances of the crossing of the boundary in the doctrines of incarnation and creation. In both cases, it appears that the boundary is crossed when the very conditions of possibility for the doctrine is denied, e.g., when it is denied that God became man, and that the cosmos is created.

How does the critical task relate to the other conditions of method? First, Oden’s hermeneutical presuppositions have a great deal of influence on the degree to which one can definitively delimit true teaching. Since history is the locus of revelation, and since Christianity

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1Oden has the following remarks concerning Paul Tillich on the incarnation: "Tillich has ruled himself out of consensual Christianity by arguing that 'the assertion that God has become man is not a paradoxical but a nonsensical statement'" (Oden, The Word of Life, 98). Similarly, on the Creation doctrines, Oden rules the following out of consensual teaching: (1) atheism because it denies any God who could have created; (2) reductive naturalism because it views the entire cosmos as uncreated and attributes all causes to natural causes; (3) pantheism because it identifies the world with God (Oden, The Living God, 250-251). See also where Oden states unequivocally that "the fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds" ("The Real Reformers Are Traditionalists," 45).

2See n. 1 above with regard to Paul Tillich and reductive naturalism.
is involved in an ongoing self-actualization process through history, orthodoxy may find itself in yet more varied expressions.¹

One specific area where Oden's hermeneutical presuppositions lead to tentativeness in the critical task is eschatology. Oden confesses that the consensus is still forming and that wide differences remain between "adventists and amillennialists, social activists and pietists, evangelicals and liberals."² The result is that in eschatology, where necessary, Oden will simply "set forth complementary positions as the best judgment of irenic consensual reasoning, hoping not to rule out any major contributor to the intended vision of the whole."³

Second, Oden's way of viewing the critical task is a consistent reflection of his material presupposition. I pointed out that, for Oden, it would be absurd to conceive of an independent use of Scripture. To define correct Christian teaching irenically (i.e., by seeking the deeper Christian consensus) implies that Scripture's voice is made to subsist in its consensual expression. But Scripture is

¹Oden argues: "Because history is not completed, we need not assume that we have seen all possible tonal nuances of Christian orthodoxy. . . . This is why the study of church history and historical theology has an especial aesthetic appeal at this juncture of cultural history, because it is like a catalogue of colors of Christian self-actualization" (Oden, After Modernity, 177).

²Oden, Life in the Spirit, 374-375.

³Ibid.
brought under the consensus in this way because of Oden’s concept of revelation which makes the Scriptures essentially pointers to revelation.

Does the critical task as discussed lead to Oden’s theological goal of understanding God as known in the Christian community? It is quite evident that Oden’s critical task via irenics and polemics precisely promotes a populist epistemology by seeking for and guarding against the understanding of God that is generally upheld in the Christian community.

Is the critical task consistently repeatable? The answer to this question depends on the extent to which the consensus is clearly definable. It is proper to defer a fuller discussion of this matter until the evaluation of Oden’s method.

Conclusion

This chapter began by describing Oden’s Vincentian method as he presents it in his explicit statements about method. It became evident that at the heart of Oden’s Vincentian method is the desire to recollect the tradition and the apostle’s teaching.

It was already apparent at the beginning that Oden’s description of his method would require further analysis since he did not intend, simply, to repeat the tradition, but renew it in each cultural context while remaining faithful to the tradition. Oden’s method was accordingly
analyzed on the basis of his hermeneutical, material, and teleological presuppositions.

This analysis has revealed in some detail what was only apparent at the surface: namely, the implied tension between an approach that is postmodern and at the same time orthodox. I have shown that Oden's hermeneutical presuppositions are very contemporary, stemming from his view of revelation which is Barthian at heart. The result of Oden's view of revelation on his sources of theology is significant. His four main sources of theology—Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—are not revelation themselves, but point to it. Consequently, the question of consensual authority for theology becomes problematic in Oden's Vincentian method.

Oden's hermeneutical principles also have an impact on his understanding of the goal of theology. Both his epistemology and ontology make room for natural theology in the realm of history and nature. As a result, Christian theology has the particular goal of understanding God as He has been known in the particular community called Christian. It is a limited goal which raises a question about the truth status of Christian teaching as absolute.

The foregoing observations, among others, bring to the fore the need to evaluate Oden's method in terms of its inner consistency and coherence with respect to the stated goals and conditions of the Vincentian method. Chapter 5
addresses that particular issue.
CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

From the previous discussion, I have sought to bring clarity to Oden's method. In order to do this, I first developed a formal structure which provides the basic framework of method per se (chapter 3), and subsequently applied this structure to Oden's writings in order to analyze his method (chapter 4).

After describing the essence of the Vincentian method, analyzing its conditional structure, and identifying its principal tasks, we turn our full attention to its evaluation. In this chapter my purpose is not to evaluate the theological conclusions at which Oden arrives on concrete theological teachings. This chapter purports to evaluate Oden's postmodern orthodoxy on the basis of the internal coherence and consistency of his method. Such an approach which focuses on internal criticism of the method deals with, besides the internal consistency of the parts of the method, the relation of the actual procedure employed to the avowed method, the implications of taking the method
seriously, and the ultimate assumptions on which the method rests.¹

The procedure to be followed in this evaluation is a fairly simple one. Beginning in chapter 3, I outlined the formal structural conditions of method and used them as my tool for analyzing Oden's method in chapter 4. In this evaluation, I take the conditions of method as analyzed individually and examine their inner consistency or inconsistency within themselves as well as in connection with other conditions of the method. In addition, I explore at each stage whether Oden is coherent or not with the classical orthodox consensus. The justification for such an approach in this evaluation stems from the nature of this dissertation which concerns itself with methodology. First, on evaluation for consistency, a method which is inconsistent in itself and its parts is at best an unusable method. Second, the test for coherence with the classical orthodox consensus is one that Oden places on himself. Before embarking on the internal criticisms of Oden's method, however, some remarks regarding the positive contribution of Oden's method are in order.

Contribution of Oden’s Method

Perhaps the key methodological contribution of Oden lies in his broad teleological intent of retrieving and calling attention to enduring insights in the earlier Christian tradition.¹ In his three-volume systematic theology Oden consistently remarks that he intends to be "self-consciously unoriginal in desiring not to add anything to an already sufficient apostolic faith but only to receive and reappropriate that faith creatively in their particular historical setting and language."² The same methodological intent is reflected in his desire to reflect the Vincentian Canon regarding what the Church has believed everywhere, always, and by all.³

The specific point to be made about the value of Oden’s methodological premise of recalling the early Christian traditional insights concerns his disdain for what he calls "the repression of modernity."⁴ Oden is concerned to discover an "unapologetic pride and candor about being faithful guardians of religious tradition precisely amid the

²See, Oden, The Living God, xiii.
³Ibid., 325.
⁴Ibid., 323.
conditions of modernity without asking either for modernity's blessing or opinion."

We may recall that Oden defines modernity as a mentality and a malaise. Oden's critique of modernity's intellectual foundation (i.e., modernity as a mentality) appears to be more widely shared than his critique of modernity as a malaise. Nevertheless, Oden's *Agenda for Theology*, which championed the critique of modernity's excesses, received some overall positive reviews.

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1 Oden, *Agenda for Theology*, 94.


3 See for example, Diogenes Allen, who remarks that "a massive intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages. The foundations of the modern world are collapsing, and we are entering a postmodern world. The principles forged during the Enlightenment (c. 1600-1780), which formed the foundations of the modern mentality are crumbling" (*Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989], 2). Among the Enlightenment principles which Allen perceives to be crumbling and which reflect Oden's critique of modernity as a mentality are the following: (1) the idea of God as superfluous intellectually, (2) the attempt to find a basis for morality and society in reason alone, (3) the belief in inevitable progress (ibid., 3-5).

4 See for example, Robert L. Saucy, who says: "few books of recent vintage have penetrated to the heart of society's current malaise" as Thomas Oden's *Agenda for Theology* ("Agenda for Theology: A Review Article," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 8 [1980]: 160). Even Theodore W. Jenning, Jr., whose overall review is negative, acknowledges that "Oden is right in sensing the bankruptcy of much of contemporary theology. . . . He is also correct in supposing that there is a sense of 'burn-out' among some of those who have entered deeply into the contemporary experience. There is a felt need for roots and for community and for tradition" ("Agenda for Theology: A Review Article," *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 35 [1981]: 134-
In spite of Oden's striving for unoriginality, he is not seeking to be premodern, or for that matter precritical. He is convinced that precritical orthodoxy will not really do for the postcritical situation. Hence Oden calls his method postmodern. It appears that Oden is himself aware of the fact that the very idea of postmodernity that is orthodox involves a tension. Oden thinks that postmodern philosophers such as Lyotard, Theofilakis, Derrida, and Kolb consider him counter-postmodern simply because he is avowedly orthodox. He points to what he thinks is at stake in his project by asking, "Can there be a postmodern orthodoxy?", to which he answers, "I think so. They think not." Whether this is so or not remains to be seen after my internal critique of Oden's method, to which we now turn.

2. Ibid., 77.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
Internal Consistency of the Parts of Oden’s Method

Throughout the previous discussion, I have attempted to show that the method question involves a goal which is actively and characteristically pursued on the basis of certain hermeneutical presuppositions and with the use of certain known material data or resources. Thus I come up with what I have called the structural conditions of method: hermeneutical, teleological, material, and instrumental conditions of method. Oden’s Vincentian method was described and analyzed on the basis of these conditions. My task presently is to evaluate the inner coherence and consistency of Oden’s method on the basis of these same conditions of the method.

Hermeneutical Condition

Is Oden coherent in the portrayal of his epistemology, ontology, and system? Oden is fairly coherent in his depiction of the three elements of his hermeneutical condition. We have seen that Oden’s epistemology features a fundamentally Barthian, neo-orthodox view which refuses to identify revelation with Scriptures, but rather understands revelation as lying in God’s personal self-disclosure.¹ It

¹Oden’s concept of revelation, however, may be distinguished somewhat from Barth’s. Whilst the latter’s view places the emphasis on the individual knower, Oden emphasizes the place of the ongoing Christian community in the revelatory process. In this respect, Oden’s views are strikingly similar to contemporary postmodern theologians such as Stanley Grenz. In Grenz’s revisioned evangelical theology, the community plays a significant role in the
was evident in my analysis that Oden sometimes seems ambiguous when dealing with this issue, yet he clearly sides with Barth's view in his epistemological condition for method.

The Barthian view of revelation which refuses to identify it with Scripture stems from an ontology which affirms the absolute transcendent "otherness" of God (timeless). This God cannot be known by man unless as He reveals Himself, which He has done primarily in Christ. In this way, the Christ-event becomes central, even normative. Scripture cannot be identified with revelation because the timeless God cannot be identified with a historical hermeneutical Scripture. These conclusions are expected, given his presuppositions.

Coherence in Oden's hermeneutical condition, however, does not necessarily mean consistency with his method as a whole. Oden's method requires that theological ideas and concepts reflect the orthodox consensus of the first five centuries of classical Christianity. We may ask

process of revelation. He writes, "On the basis of Karl Barth's identification of the dependent relationship between the inscripturated word and the Word incarnate, we must view the revelation in history in terms of the process of community formation arising out of the paradigmatic events that stand at its genesis. . . . Through the interaction of each succeeding generation with the biblical documents, the paradigmatic events and the early confrontation with these events become a continual source of revelation for the ongoing life of the community" (Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 76-77).
whether Oden's view of revelation coheres with the view of the classical consensus which his method avows.

Oden's view of revelation may be shown to be incoherent with the classical view on two fronts: the fixing of the time of revelation and the failure to identify revelation with Scripture.¹ What is the classical view on these two fronts?

In his *Ecclesial Reflection* Edward Farley has argued strongly that classical criteriology presupposes not only the periodization of revelation-redemption but the restriction of revelation to a past period.² According to this view, there is an epoch of revelation which is normative for all times.³ Farley argues that for the Christian Church Jesus is the central event-person of revelation. The apostles who describe this event and formulate it in a kerygma are unique recipients of God's revealing word. Accordingly, "when their period ends, revelation ends. Thus, the for-all-times valid and

¹See Farley, *Ecclesial Reflections*. Farley argues that the framework of classical criteriology is a framework of authority. In this, he aligns himself with Auguste Sabatier, *Religions of Authority and Religions of the Spirit*, trans. L. S. Houghton (New York: McClure, Philips, 1904). Among the axioms that Farley outlines as especially important as presuppositions of classical criteriology is "the marking off of the era of revelation" (Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection*, 31-50).


³Ibid.
sufficient disclosure of God occurred in an identifiable and now completed period in the past."¹

A logical development of the special period of revelation is the principle of identity by virtue of which certain writings, in this case the Scriptures, become the locus of identity of God's will. In other words, the unique presence of God, which marks off the period of revelation as causally effected by God, works by the principle of identity to invest the Scriptures with the same divine causal efficacy. This is the classical doctrine of inspiration, by virtue of which the Bible is identified with revelation.²

¹Ibid. Farley himself is of the view that nothing in the nature of revelation necessarily restricts it to specific periods of time. In fact, he believes in an ongoing concept of revelation, yet he concedes that classical criteriology restricts revelation to a past period. Cf. Leon Morris, I Believe in Revelation (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), 42-43. Morris suggests that revelation, i.e., special revelation, ceased with the close of the canon.

²Farley explains it as follows: "The principle of identity involves interpreting the creaturely entity as the ersatz presence of the divine, a synthesis of divine intention and human interpretation into one content, and the explanation of that content by divine causal efficacy. The result is an identity of content between what is divinely willed (revealed) and what is humanly asserted" (Farley, Ecclesial Reflection, 38). See also J. I. Packer who insists: "The word of God consists of revealed truths" (Fundamentalism and the Word of God [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1958], 91). On the identification of Scripture with revelation see H. D. McDonald, who writes, "It had been the prevailing view that revelation and the Bible were for all practical purposes to be equated" (Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, 1860-1960 [London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963], 161). So Clark Pinnock, The Scripture Principle (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), xi; Millard J. Erickson, A Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 196-7.
On both counts of fixing the time of revelation and identifying the Scripture with revelation, Oden is not entirely consistent with his method which requires concordance with the classical consensus of the first five centuries of Christianity. First, contrary to classical criteriology as expounded by Farley, Oden clearly states that "God continues to reveal himself in ever-emergent human history" (emphasis mine) in a way that "complements, extends and develops, but does not negate, past disclosures."\(^1\)

Obviously Oden's position on this issue is a revisionary one which accords with his postmodern agenda, but it stands in stark contrast to the classical consensus of the first five centuries of Christianity.

Second, the classical view identifies revelation with Scriptures, but, for Oden, the Bible is only "the deposit of the sufficient and adequate witness to God's self-disclosure."\(^2\) The Bible itself is not revelation; it is a witness, albeit normative witness to revelation (the Christ-event); it "records the events of divine disclosure."\(^3\)

The foregoing epistemological issues in Oden have far-reaching theological implications which set him on a collision course with his own avowed classical Christian

\(^1\)Oden, *The Living God*, 334.

\(^2\)Ibid., 336.

\(^3\)Ibid., 343.
commitments. His view of Scripture, not as revelation but as a record of revelation, and his idea of a continuing revelation are both a reflection of his historical view of revelation.¹ The total effect of these epistemological presuppositions is to lead Oden to an idea of truth which is incoherent with the classical orthodox consensus. Again, Farley's analysis of classical criteriology is instructive. Farley argues that, in the classical view, the identity of what is divinely willed and what is humanly asserted is an identity which is of a cognitive nature.² In other words, not only is a truth or reality known by God through communication now known by human beings, but more importantly, the principle of identity in classical criteriology requires that divinity be predicated of the cognitive act which comes about in the divine-human process of inspiration.³ Consequently, Farley observes that "one of the striking features of the writings (Fathers, Councils, Reformers) of classical Catholicism and Protestantism is the

¹On this Oden has acknowledged his dependence on Pannenberg's views on revelation as history. For a brief but lucid summary of Pannenberg's view on revelation and history see Millard J. Erickson, "Pannenberg's Use of History as a Solution to the Religious Language Problem," Journal of Evangelical Theological Society 17 (1974): 99-105.

²Farley, Ecclesial Reflection, 39.

³Ibid., 38-39.
acknowledgment of the divine status of the truth for which they are contending."

Oden’s views on revelation, however, lead him to a concept of truth that is at best a convergence of plausibility. More will be said about the status of the truth question in Oden when I evaluate his teleological principle. For now, it suffices to observe that in Oden’s methodology, comprehensive coherence represents a departure from the classical view on Christian truth.

The combination of Oden’s epistemological views on revelation and his ontological ideas of common grace raises a potential problem for his system as well, i.e., the Christ event. First, Oden tells us that the locus of revelation is history; not just the history of Israel, but universal history, although the meaning of all of history is to be learned from the vantage point of the history of Israel.

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1Ibid., 34-35.

2Oden, The Living God, 385. It may be that Oden’s inconsistency on the truth issue is only a material one, for while his notion of comprehensive coherence may be at odds with the classical notion of Christian truth, formally, Oden is being more consistent than the classical view. The philosophical difficulty of reconciling an ontology that affirms a timeless God and hence timeless truth with an epistemology that affirms a timeless historical truth has been acknowledged in recent years. See, for example, Clark Pinnock, "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classical Theism," in Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 37. Hence Oden’s introduction of corrigibility in Christian truth (i.e., truth standing the test of time) is a consistent result of translating timeless truths in temporal medium.
Second, common grace is universally endowed. If revelation is an ongoing phenomenon throughout all history and if the Christ-event ontologically informs all history,¹ in what sense should the Christ-event be singularly paradigmatic in the ongoing stream of revelation in history as the Christian gospel insists? The issue being raised here is a little different from the charge of soteriological universalism which Oden claims to face persistently.² Oden wards off the

¹Oden is careful to insist that the ontological significance of the Christ-event not be divorced from its historical manifestation. Thus, he argues that while the "not guilty" verdict of the Christ-event is ontological, "it should not be inferred from it that it is not at the same time historical through an event. The verdict of forgiveness has an implication for universal being precisely because it is historical in the Christ event as an ontological event" (Oden, After Therapy—What?, 192).

²Ibid. Oden writes, "One of the most persistent criticisms with which I have had to deal is that I have drifted off into a vague and uncritical soteriological universalism" (Oden, The Structure of Awareness, 104-106). Oden points to his distinction between universal justification, which is for all, and universal salvation, which is limited by actual reception, in defense of this criticism (ibid.). Yet, even here, Oden’s position seems to be inconsistent, in spite of his explicit rejection of this criticism. This appears to be so because of some statements he makes which seemingly compromise his position on universal salvation. Oden states that "the sole source of true religion is not in any human moral or intellectual achievement, but God’s own justifying grace" (Oden, The Living God, 372-373). On the basis of this premise, it is possible to argue that since in Oden God’s justification is available to all, all religions are true religions. Indeed, Oden comes close to saying this when he writes: "The best Christian teaching is not contemptuous of other religions, but views each history of religious struggle as a statement of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all human history. Christians can learn from these histories of religions powerful insights that bestow greater light upon the biblical understandings of God" (The Living God, 374). Thus Oden seems to contradict himself when he states elsewhere.
charge of soteriological universalism by distinguishing between universal justification and universal salvation. My concern here has to do with how, given Oden's understanding of revelation in history, one particular event in history (the Christ-event) can possess absolute revelatory significance. Oden points out one of the two differences between Christianity and other religions to be its source. He writes, "Christianity's source is God making himself known personally and for all time to be sure, within a process of historical development, but not explainable as a natural . . . result of that historical development."¹ But such a unique claim for Christianity cannot be sustained in the face of the more universalist epistemological views of Oden.² It follows from the foregoing that Oden's unique

that "Christianity differs from the religions of the world in that its understanding of God comes, not from human striving, intellect and will, but from God's own self disclosure in human history, through the people of Israel, which culminates and clarifies itself finally only in Jesus Christ" (emphasis mine) (ibid., 373). How is this possible if Oden's epistemology does not limit revelation to a particular time and a particular history and if the Christ-event ontologically justifies all?

¹Oden, The Living God, 373.

²For a discussion on Oden's alleged universalism and his rebuttal of the charge, see Calvin Schoonhaven, "The Theological Substructure of Oden's Theology and Psychology Synthesis," in After Theology What? Finch Lectures by Thomas C. Oden with Responses by Neil C. Warren [and others], ed. Neil C. Warren, 115-120; 192-103. These difficulties in Oden's thought compare with those in Pannenberg with whom Oden shares similar ideas on revelation and history. Carl Braaten has noted that universalist features permeate Pannenberg's theology of universal history. Consequently, Braaten questions "whether
claim for Christianity and its Christ-event appears to be logically inconsistent with his universalist epistemological and ontological presuppositions, namely, universal history as the locus of revelation and common grace, which is a universal endowment.

Teleological Condition

How coherent is Oden's conception of the goal of theology and how consistent is he in pursuing his goal? The question regarding coherence belongs properly to my teleological evaluation while the question about consistency belongs rightly to my evaluation of the method as activity, which will be taken up subsequently. I have pointed out that, for Oden, theology is a secondary, reflective exercise whereby one attempts to clarify the understanding of God held within the Christian community. Thus Christian theology is the ordering of the community's self-understanding which it has experienced in God's self-disclosure in the Christ-event. Such reflection and clarification are conceived in a postmodern context which distinguishes Oden's orthodoxy from premodern orthodoxy.

Oden observes that two opposite ideological predispositions have always been at work in Christian reflection: conserving and progressing.\(^1\) While the conserving mind prizes the past, the progressing mind prizes the future of truth and new insights. Oden’s goal in his postmodern theology is to strive for an understanding of God within the tension of and openness to new scientific developments.\(^2\) It is true that most evaluations of Oden’s latest work see him as weighing heavily on the side of conserving,\(^3\) yet at least formally, the ideas of conserving and progressing are both a part of his method. The conserving side of Oden is evident in his desire to stand in the line of the orthodox consensus, but his progressing side is not as easily identified. Ostensibly, his insistence on the distinction between his postmodern orthodoxy and premodern orthodoxy must mean that the progressing element in him will reflect the impact of the material condition of his method in his apologetic task, especially from the

\(^1\)Oden, *The Living God*, 362.

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)See, for example, Ted Peters, "The God of Classical Theism," *Cross Currents* 38 (1988/89): 477-480; also Charles S. McCoy, who writes, "Oden rightly affirms the importance of communal continuity, yet confuses such continuity with the repetition of static formulars assumed to embody orthodoxy" ("Agenda for Theology," *Religion in Life* 48 [1979]: 513).
contributions of modern sociology, physics, psychology, and modern history.¹

I have made the foregoing remarks to make the point that the teleological condition in Oden’s method seeks to reflect on and clarify the particular understanding of God in the Christian community in such a way as to conserve the traditional Christian self-understanding of God while attempting at the same time to be progressive. Are the ideas of conserving and progressing compatible or are they formally mutually exclusive?

We have seen that, in Oden’s method, conserving the tradition implies that one speaks with the mind of the orthodox consensus, as constituted especially during the first five centuries of Christian history. This is the essence of Oden’s Vincentian method. The Vincentian requirements of universality, antiquity, and consensus to satisfy orthodoxy, coalesce in the doctrinal definition of the first five centuries of the Christian era. The practical effect of the orthodox consensus was that Scripture was properly interpreted only when it was seen as standing in agreement with tradition.²

¹Oden, After Modernity, 43.

The structural result of oden’s emphasis on the orthodox consensus is what Charles Brummett describes as "hermeneutical reductionism." Brummett argues that Oden’s overemphasis of the orthodox consensus "denies that a believer can stand before an open Biblical text and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit be led to new discoveries other than those already found." In view of the immediate preceding critique, one is at odds to understand how Oden can simultaneously maintain that "one who studies God . . . must study his or her own era, and the Spirit of his or her own times, yet not assume that one particular time, society, or era in itself absolutely reveals the truth." Even if the first five centuries of the Christian era as a period do not define Christian truth absolutely, it is quite evident in Oden’s method that he sees the orthodox consensus of this period as definitive and normative for Christian truth.

There is certainly some difficulty in reconciling the conserving and progressing elements in Oden’s method, which he seems to recognize by his appraisal of John Newman’s idea of development stated below. Oden defers to

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in their writings have expounded it, and in these let them glory rather than in making things up out of their own heads, lest through their lack of skill they depart from what is proper" (ibid.).

1Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 281.

2Ibid.

3Oden, The Living God, 363.
John Henry Newman’s idea of "development" as providing "an original formula for the solution of the dilemma between archaism and sheer novelty."¹ Oden correctly understands Newman as proposing that it is normative for the Christian tradition precisely to be mutating, and that "in each new appropriation, something new is discovered about what was there in the beginning implicitly."² Thus Oden sees Newman as preeminent among conserving radicals of the nineteenth century.

Oden’s deference to Newman’s idea of development is not altogether satisfactory. If Oden acknowledges in Newman’s concept of development that "everything that unfolds is implicit in the process from the beginning,"³ if he agrees that "we are in the midst, and not yet at the end of this development,"⁴ and if he concedes that "the depositum of faith is fully given . . . waiting historical circumstances to bring it into view," then it is difficult to see the rationale with which Oden discounts the post-Reformation and the modern church’s development of doctrine.⁵ The situation becomes quite intriguing when Oden

¹Oden, After Therapy, 70.
²Ibid., 71.
³Ibid., 70.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Brummett’s critique of Oden on this point is telling. "After 1979 Oden consistently argued, on the basis of classical ecumenical consensus, that theology is to be
remarks rather approvingly that "with remarkable originality, Newman speaks of a 'particular superiority (so to speak) of later times over apostolic', by which he means that later historical situations call for and enable more explicit definitions of faith than were called for or needed in apostolic times." Clearly, the tension between the conserving and progressing elements in Oden's method is not eased by his appeal to Newman's concept of development. On the contrary, the application of Newman's concept to Oden's method appears to introduce new contradictions.  

The Truth Question in Oden's Method

In the previous section, we noted that the evaluation of the goal of theology in Oden's method will be unoriginal and non-innovative. Postmodern theology's task, according to Oden, is the descriptive maintenance of classical orthodox consensus, which Oden insisted is to be determined by application of the Vincentian canon. When, however, that classical orthodox consensus did not support Oden's position regarding the role of women in the pastoral office, Oden argued that theology's task was no longer simply the descriptive maintenance of the apostolic tradition but the prescriptive mutation of that tradition. Cannot that application be made at other points? Newman's analogy, when pushed to its logical consequence would hold that 'everything that unfolds is implicit in the process from the beginning.' Why then, the necessity to disregard completely the post-reformation and modern church's development of doctrine in the formulation of postmodern orthodoxy?" (Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 279).

1Oden, After Therapy, 72.

2Brummett appears to perceive correctly that "postmodernity, perhaps not as Oden theoretically defines it but as he functionally extrapolates it, too often flirts with the regressivist illusion that older is better" (Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 195).
bring up the question of truth. The issue is whether Oden's understanding of the goal of theology is coherent with the classical tradition, given its understanding of the goal of theology. In the last section we noted that Oden's epistemology which leads to his notion of "comprehensive coherence" is inconsistent with the classical tradition. In this section, I extend the evaluation of the truth question in Oden to include its scope and assess whether it is coherent with the classical position.

Farley underlines the universality of the classical tradition's truth-intentions when he describes the context out of which the classical Christian concern for truth arose. He explains that the concern for truth has its rootage "in Israelite faith and the Christian mythos, for the elements of that mythos are the one God, author of everything other than himself, bestowing reality and unity on the created world." Furthermore, according to Farley's reasoning, these elements found "a reality-oriented posture toward the world which is uncomfortable with deception . . . and which cannot be utterly indifferent to questions of truth." Therefore, Christian truth intends not only to be universal in scope, but is also reality-oriented.

Oden's manner of conceptualizing the goal of theology in his method appears to vary a bit from the

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1 Farley, Ecclesial Reflection, 113.

2 Ibid.
classical position on both the definite and absolute universality of Christian truth claims as well as their reality intentions. We have noted that it is fundamental to Oden's understanding of theology that it is a secondary reflective enterprise which focuses on "Christian faith" and seeks to clarify "the particular idea of God peculiar to the Christian community."¹ (emphasis mine). The phrases "particular idea of God" and "peculiar to Christian community" appear to reflect a certain provincialism in Oden's conception of Christian theology that has remained with him throughout his career.² While it is correct to insist that Christian theology must be undertaken from the center of faith, the classical tradition appeared to have the universal religious domain in its sights with its theological conclusions.

The issue appears to turn on Oden's view that in arguing that Christianity is a true religion, "the classical teachers have not meant to imply that any given statement of Christianity holds absolute knowledge of God (such as God has of himself)."³ If Christian statements do not relate, for example, to God as He really is, then Christian theology


²Brummett observes, "Throughout his career Oden has understood theology's task to be secondary, i.e., theology does not reflect directly upon God, but upon God as experienced within the community of faith" (Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 165).

is second-order theology, or a "secondary reflective enterprise," as Oden calls it.\(^1\) But if Christian theological statements as second-order propositions do not necessarily reflect reality as it really is, then what are they intending to reflect? Are Christian theological formulations merely particular models of reality as postmodernism insists?\(^2\) This conclusion would seem to be the logical one from Oden's understanding of Christian

\(^{1}\)Wayne Proudfoot makes a clear distinction between first-order and second-order theology when he reflects on Gordon Kaufman: "First-order theology is executed when theologians claim to explain God and the world as they really are. Second-order theology emerges when the theologian realizes that her concepts are constructs of the imagination" (Wayne Proudfoot, "Regulae fidei and Regulative Idea: Two Contemporary Theological Strategies," in Theology at the End of Modernity, ed. Sheila Greevy Davaney [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991], 107). The distinction between first-order statements and second-order statements also parallels the distinction between theological statements as propositions or rules. Postliberal and postmodern theologians insist on treating doctrinal statements as rules and not propositions. See Lindbeck, 79-84.

\(^{2}\)Stanley Grenz reflects the postmodernist position quite clearly: "Theology is a second-order enterprise, and its propositions are second-order propositions. Theology formulates in culturally conditioned language the confession and world-view of the community of faith--of their people who have been constituted by the human response to the story of the salvific act of God in the history of Jesus the Christ. . . . The assertion the theology speaks a second-order language is not intended to deny the ontological nature of theological declarations. Nevertheless, the ontological claims implicit in theological assertions arise as an outworking of the intent of the theologian to provide a model of reality, rather than to describe reality directly" (Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 78). Obviously, the postmodern view of Christian truth and doctrine creates some concern among evangelicals. See Millard J. Erickson, The Evangelical Left (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); idem, Postmodernizing the Faith.
theology as a secondary reflective enterprise. Such a conclusion, however, would be incoherent with the classical orthodox consensus.

Against the background of Oden's epistemology, his view of the goal of theology appears to share the contemporary postmodern view. His failure to identify the Bible with revelation implies that any theology based on the Bible must necessarily be a second-order enterprise. The implications are worth noting. First, although Christian theological reflection may intend truth, such reflection does not settle the truthfulness of the issue it deals with.¹ This conclusion arises from the very nature of theological reflection as a second-order enterprise. Consequently, the products of Christian theological reflection may logically be assessed as one among many

¹On this point, Farley argues with clarity. "To acknowledge truth-intentions in the ecclesial and belief-ful community is not, therefore, to settle the status of the community's past and present interpretations and judgments. The community may intend as reality-bearing the image of Jesus as the Christ, but this does not settle one way or another the claim that the second person of the triune being of God is incarnate in Jesus. And although that interpretative judgment may find its way into the portraiture of ecclesial existence, the portrayal itself does not settle its 'truth'" (Farley, Ecclesial Reflection, 303). Contrasting the postmodern situation to the classical tradition, Farley writes: "Since truth was an a priori feature of the authoritative documents which served as both the bearers and the criteria of truth, the only remaining task was to synthesize authorities into modes of coherence or to relate their contents to wider philosophical and cosmic schemes" (ibid., 304).
models of reality. Oden himself does not explicitly draw this conclusion since he recognizes that "there is a certain resistance in classical Christian teaching to speaking of Christianity as one among many religions." Yet this does not prevent Oden from arguing that the Holy Spirit is working in these other religions and that we can learn from these religions powerful insights that bestow greater light upon the biblical understanding of God.

Whether we point to a lack of certainty of Christian truth-intentions in Oden's method or an apparent willingness to recognize other religions, the fundamental issue has to do with his failure to see Christian theology as reflecting directly on God, world, etc. Oden's position on this issue appears to be incoherent with the classical orthodox Christian position of the first five centuries of Christianity. Wayne Proudfoot observes that

it would be surely anachronistic to view the Nicene and Chalcedonian symbols and other formulations of religious doctrine as rules only where "rule" is described in such a way as to render it innocent of first-order statements. These doctrines developed out of inquiry elicited by particular problems: what is the relation of Jesus to God, of Christians to Jews, of the kingdom of God to the message of the prophets, and of the authority of the Bible to Greek philosophy?

\[\text{See n. 1, p. 249, above.}\]

\[\text{Oden writes, "The best Christian teaching is not contemptuous of other religions, but views each history of religious struggle as a statement of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all human history. Christians can learn from these histories of religions powerful insights that bestow greater light upon the biblical understanding of God" (The Living God, 374).}\]
Doctrinal formulations were often constructed so as to rule out unacceptable answers to these questions. . . . These formulations were not, however, constructed to be radically independent of all first-order claims about the world.¹

Oden's characterization of Christian theology as a secondary reflective enterprise which does not reflect directly on God creates certain ambiguities in his systematic reflection that was uncharacteristic of the classic tradition. For example, his discourse on miracles reveals such ambiguities. On the one hand, Oden does not wish to establish miracles as supernatural in character in contravention of nature's laws.² Neither is Oden ready to make miracles credible only if they accord with human experience.³ Oden rather endeavors to transform the conception of what is natural. His argument is that in an intelligible world, all effects have causes, the causal agents being either physical, chemical, moral, or God.

¹Proudfoot, 112-113.

²Oden writes, "The nineteenth century controversy over the possibility of miracles was largely a squabble about a definition. If miracle is defined as suspension of natural law, then it could be asserted that such a suspension is impossible and miracles could be ruled out on the grounds that they have no analogy in normal human experience. Rather, the biblical texts themselves are not concerned with whether natural law can be suspended, but with a simple observed fact: Jesus healed the sick" (Oden, The Word of Life, 302).

³After observing that the birth narratives of Christ have found their way into the canon, he argues that "they cannot belatedly be arbitrarily weeded out of the canon on the grounds that they do not fit neatly into an empiricist worldview" (ibid., 152).
Therefore, he notes, "nothing occurs either in the natural order or those moral and spiritual orders that transcend natural order that violates the various natures in those orders." On this interpretation of the natural, Oden concludes that Jesus' miracles were "preternatural," not "contranatural." Although Oden does not appear to deny miracles in the Humean sense, neither does he endorse unequivocally their supernaturalism in the classical sense.

To summarize, Oden's approach to the goal of theology as a secondary reflective activity on the faith of the believing community does not necessarily cohere with the classical view which conceived theology as the discovery of the doctrinal system inherent in the Bible. This view,

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1Ibid., 303.
2Ibid.
3Ibid. Compare Oden's attempts with those of an earlier Methodist theologian, Albert C. Knudson. Knudson had argued that "there is no fundamental or metaphysical difference between the natural and the miraculous. All nature is grounded in the will of God, and by 'natural,' we mean simply the familiar and by the 'miraculous' an unfamiliar method of the divine working. Both that divine or supernatural in their causation" (Albert C. Knudson, quoted in William J. Abraham, "On How to Dismantle the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: A Study in the Thought of Albert C. Knudson," Wesleyan Theological Journal 20 [1985]: 34-44). Cf. Oden, who writes, "The miracles were as natural for the Son as creating was for the Father. Hence to describe them as supernatural is to select a human vantage point from which to view them" (The Living Word, 303).

Abraham observes that all the many modern versions of Knudson's thesis on miracles presented above depart from the classical tradition and represent the death of supernaturalism in the classical sense.

4Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 87.
essentially, replaces a propositionalist approach to the theological enterprise with a revisioned understanding of evangelical theology.\(^1\) Thus, Oden's explanation of miracles represents an attempt to define miracles in the contemporary socio-historical context in a way that harmonizes with the Bible and the historic positions of the faith community. It is difficult to undertake such an exercise without a corresponding revisioned understanding of the nature of the sources of doing theology. We have seen that Oden's primary approach to the sources of theology is the Wesleyan quadrilateral. I propose to evaluate Oden's discussion on the sources of theology in terms of its internal consistency and coherence with the classical position.

**Material Condition**

My analysis of the material condition in Oden's method showed that the Wesleyan quadrilateral provides his primary sources for theological reflection. My goal here is not to evaluate the theological value of the Wesleyan

\(^1\)Ibid. Grenz observes that twentieth-century postfundamentalist evangelical theology tended to take a propositionalist approach to the theological enterprise. This conceived the task of theology as the discovery of the doctrinal system that inheres in the Bible. According to Grenz, it is a crucial goal of a revisioned evangelical theology to move beyond the propositionalist paradigm, while maintaining its central affirmation.
quadrilateral but rather its consistency and coherence with Oden's method.¹

Oden's understanding of the quadrilateral of sources involves four sources, Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, which must be always held in creative tension since all are responsive to the revealed word.² Oden compares the quadrilateral of sources to the legs of a chair and argues that the overstretch on anyone of them leads to an imbalance.³

The Quadrilateral in the Classical Tradition

Is the quadrilateral of sources as employed by Oden evident in the classic tradition? Oden himself acknowledges that although his approach is only implicitly employed by ancient ecumenical writers, there is no adequate, explicit clarification of the relation of the sources until the Reformation and modern periods.⁴ The preceding admission on Oden's part leads Brummett to point out what he sees as a methodological inconsistency. According to Brummett, since Oden's postmodern theological agenda seeks to recover Christian roots, and since Christian roots do not reflect a

¹For a brief evaluation of the theological value of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, see Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 90-93.

²Oden, The Living God, 341.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 332.
balance of the four sources of theology, "the achievement of epistemological balance is not possible in the manner in which Oden has conceptualized it. This is what causes Oden to collapse into archaism at points."¹

It appears that Oden's construal of the quadrilateral of sources is not even consistent with Wesley who was allegedly committed to the quadrilateral.² According to William Abraham, Wesley shared the Reformers' view that the Scriptures constitute the criterion for all theological proposals. The consequence of this position held by Wesley was that "none of the other elements in the quadrilateral can be viewed as a coordinate canon of equal standing with the Bible."³ According to Abraham such weighting of Scripture in the quadrilateral by Wesley is a

¹Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 278. Grenz also notices the lack of epistemological balance even among the practitioners of the quadrilateral in the Wesleyan tradition. He observes that "although affirming all four as valid, Wesleyan theologians tend to elevate one or another of the points of the quadrilateral above the others" (Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 91).


³Ibid. On his part Ted Campbell, while recognizing the theological value of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, has rejected its genesis in the thinking of John Wesley (Campbell, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, 87-95). Campbell discloses the real genesis of the quadrilateral. "The notion of the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral,' then, would be an intricate composite of these sources, formed under the crucible of Methodist involvement in the ecumenical movement, and then found almost indispensable by Methodists themselves in their defence of a progressive attitude towards biblical authority" (emphasis mine) (94).
reflection of his doctrine of divine revelation and divine inspiration. For Wesley, Abraham reflects, "Scripture is the product of direct, divine inspiration construed in terms of divine dictation and speaking, therefore, it is the primary means of access to the divine will."¹

Abraham's reflection on Wesley's view of the quadrilateral contradicts Oden's view on the place of Scripture in the quadrilateral of sources. It is true that Oden too accords primacy to Scripture in the quadrilateral, but in Oden, Scripture is primary by virtue of its chronological location in the history of revelation. In Oden, all the elements in the quadrilateral are responsive to revelation; but Scripture, after its canonization, is chronologically prior to tradition, reason, and experience.²

Another implication of the incorporation of the Wesleyan quadrilateral in Oden's method that needs to be pointed out is that it results in the rejection of the Protestant Scriptural principle. Grenz classes Paul Tillich's method of correlation and the Wesleyan quadrilateral among attempts to incorporate into the traditional commitment to sola scriptura an explicit concern

¹Abraham, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 121.

²Cf. Abraham, who writes, "for Wesley, Scripture has primacy not because the community says it has primacy . . . Scripture has primacy because it was objectively and actually brought into being by divine inspiration and divine dictation" ("On How to Dismantle the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 39).
for the contextualizing of theology.¹ Grenz is equally clear in stating that "the commitment to contextualization, however, entails an implicit rejection of the older evangelical conception of theology as the construction of truth on the basis of the Bible alone."²

**Tradition in Oden’s Use of the Quadrilateral**

Not only does Oden’s idea of holding the elements of the quadrilateral in creative tension contradict the classical tradition with respect to the primacy of Scripture, he himself weights tradition most heavily in the quadrilateral.³ Tradition gains the upper hand in Oden’s employment of the quadrilateral because of his understanding of its nature. We may recall from the discussion on the nature of tradition that it has reception and transmission as its poles. The reception pole corresponds to the

¹Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 90.
²Ibid.
³Brummett evaluates Oden as having weighted tradition most heavily. He writes: "The postmodern theologian functionally placed more emphasis upon the role of Scripture and tradition in the development of theology. He weighted tradition most heavily. Scripture was seen from the perspective of its mediation through tradition. Experience was no longer seen from the perspective of the modern person but through the intergenerational social experience of the believing community. The reasoning capacity of the contemporary theologian took a back seat to the corporate reasoning power of the historical development of doctrine. The primary reasoning was that of the believing community and the primary experience was that of the believing community passed down intergenerationally" (Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 270).
believing community’s attempts to pass down the deposit it has received.

Scripture, which contains the deposit, becomes strangled by tradition when Oden argues that it is not necessary to decide between Scripture and what the church historically teaches in order to define the rule of faith. The argument caries the unwarranted assumption that reception and transmission of the tradition necessarily coincide. It is argued that classical traditional theism, for example, as transmitted, has not correctly reflected the biblical viewpoint. The stranglehold of tradition on

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1 Oden, The Living God, 344. Brummett observes, "Pushed to its logical consequences, Oden’s methodology, or at least as he applies it, allows Scripture to collapse into tradition. It infers that the only necessary and sufficient conditions for the life of faith in the contemporary world are given in the received tradition. Such a method effectually displaces sola scriptura with sola traditio, a hermeneutical interchange which at least some descendants of the Reformation find unappealing" (Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 281).

2 Clark Pinnock has forthrightly stated his conviction that "the form of theism received from great theologians like Augustine and Anselm is not completely faithful to Scripture and has adopted certain philosophical notions, Greek in its origin, and therefore does not stand beyond criticism from a biblically-oriented evangelical" (Pinnock, "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classical Theism," 37).

So, John Sanders, who writes: "Greek thought has played an extensive role in the development of the traditional doctrine of God. But the classical view of God worked out in the Western tradition is at odds at several key points . . . of the biblical text" (57).

Earlier critics of traditional theism from a biblical point of view includes Emil Brunner who argued that the synthesis of revelational and philosophical elements in classical theism represents a subversion of biblical faith (Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of God [Philadelphia:
Scripture in Oden's employment of the quadrilateral could be shown to extend to reason and experience too. It is sufficient for the purpose of this discussion to limit this evaluation to the relation between tradition and Scripture simply to make the point that Oden himself has not been consistent in maintaining the balance in his use of the quadrilateral.

Structural Weaknesses in the Present Conception of the Quadrilateral

The fact that Oden is able to use the quadrilateral in a way that enables tradition to overshadow the rest of the elements in the quadrilateral points to a weakness in the conceptualization of the quadrilateral. The weakness is a structural one, which fails to guarantee that the quadrilateral will be used with any degree of consistency.

Thomas A. Langford points to at least three areas of indeterminacy which require clarification, delineation, and specification in order to bring legitimacy to the use of the quadrilateral.¹ Langford points, first of all, to what he

calls the "deceptive simplicity," which assumes that each of the categories of the quadrilateral is clear.\(^1\) He observes that "there is no stability of consistency" in the use of the four elements of the quadrilateral among Methodists since each of them is open to a variety of interpretations.\(^2\)

Another area that requires further attention according to Langford is "the work of nuancing the interrelationships of these elements."\(^3\) Among the issues of concern, Langford outlines "what primacy means as dynamic interaction, what impingements and balances are to be sought, how each element conditions the others."\(^4\) In other words, it is one thing, for example, to affirm the primacy of Scripture, but it is another thing to maintain that primacy in the concrete interaction of the various elements in the quadrilateral.

A third area of concern which Langford mentions is the relation of the quadrilateral to specific historical contexts. This implies that the meaning of the various elements of the quadrilateral and their interrelationships must reflect the specific historical context or social location where it is employed.\(^5\) According to Langford, an

\(^1\)Ibid., 233.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Ibid., 239.
\(^4\)Ibid., 240.
\(^5\)Ibid., 234.
element of praxis must be introduced into the quadrilateral, without which it becomes too theoretical.\footnote{Langford argues that, for John Wesley, the categories of the quadrilateral do not possess absolute truth.} Reflecting on these concerns in connection with Oden’s employment of the quadrilateral, two things come to view. First, Oden is quite clear on the meaning he attaches to each of the elements in the quadrilateral. What Oden does not tell us with specificity is the nature of the interrelationship amongst the elements. It is simply not enough to say that "the study of God best proceeds with the fitting equilibrium of these four sources, one primary and three secondary."\footnote{Oden, \textit{The Living God}, 341.} There does not appear to be any principle by which he maintains the primacy of Scripture. What appears to be lacking is a carefully delineated working relation among the elements of the quadrilateral.

The particular ways in which the internal difficulties of the three conditions of Oden’s method evaluated above become expressed will attain clarity as I evaluate Oden’s method itself as an activity.

Method as Activity

What I have called here method as activity focuses on method as an activity or set of activities by which the objective/s which called for the method in the first place is/are reached. Given Oden’s methodological goal of
apprehending the knowledge of God as known in the Christian community, I have isolated three tasks or activities of method which attempt to apprehend, defend, and self-regulate the particular knowledge of God held in the Christian community. As noted above, these tasks represent theology’s constructive, apologetic, and critical tasks. My objective in this evaluation is to examine the consistency with which Oden undertakes these tasks.

The Constructive Task

We may recall that the constructive task relates basically to the formulation of Christian teaching. In formulating Christian teaching, Oden wishes to build on the foundation of the orthodox consensus. Since the orthodox consensus means the view of the ancient fathers,¹ the citing of early authorities is fundamental to Oden’s constructive efforts. This means that my evaluation of Oden’s constructive task will focus heavily on the material condition of his method. The relevant question at this point is, How consistently has Oden applied his own method with respect to his views on the material condition? I will defer the issue of correctly and consistently reflecting the consensus to my evaluation of the critical task. For now, I focus on the complicated task of citing authorities.

¹See Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, 336-7.
I maintain that the task of citing authorities in the constructive effort is complicated because of the complex nature of the demands that are placed on it. First, we should be reminded that Oden's method requires that sources must be cited and employed in the context of the quadrilateral of sources. This requirement means that, in citing authorities, a delicate balance ought to be maintained amongst Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience while keeping an eye on the primacy of Scripture. Oden's method has additional demands besides the delicate balancing of the quadrilateral of sources. Since Oden intends to build on the consensus of the first five centuries of Christianity, authorities ought to be cited in a way that reflects the orthodox consensus.

Second, the situation becomes more complex when Oden's method requires the setting up of a second set of relationships, i.e., the weighting of sources in a hierarchical manner in his pyramid of sources. It should be evident, already at this formal level, that the constructive task involves a complex set of relationships that makes it extremely difficult to manage practically. If we take Scripture, for example, not only must Scripture be cited as interpreted in the tradition consensually in a manner that accords with reason and contemporary experience, the particular interpretation of Scripture must place low in the pyramid of sources to achieve greater legitimacy.
Does Oden's practice reflect these complex relationships? Even a casual observation shows that Oden's practice does not give us any guidelines to work through these apparently competing demands placed on the constructive task by the material condition as analyzed in his method.

On two different issues in *Life in the Spirit*, Oden adopts two completely different approaches in his constructive effort. The first teaching has to do with the deity of the Holy Spirit. In arguing that the Spirit is God, Oden firmly establishes the argument on the basis of Scripture with a sprinkling of a few consensual writers.


The second teaching deals with the intermediate state of the just and unjust. The particular question at hand is whether the intermediate state is distinguishable from heaven. In arguing that believers at death enter paradise immediately, Oden relies almost completely on Fathers and Councils. Using Luke 16:23-31, Oden cites the testimonies of Fathers and Councils in this order: Gregory of Nyssa, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Ambrose, Novatian, Novatian,

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Origen, Eusebius, Gregory Nazianzen, Second Council of Lyons, 1274, and Benedict XII.¹

Such differences in practice raise questions about consistency in Oden's method. How does Oden decide whether to build on Scripture or tradition? Is citing consensual exegetes alone without Scripture sufficient to define doctrine? What about the primacy of Scripture? Is the constructive task repeatable consistently? Since Oden himself does not appear to follow any particular predictable method in citing authorities in his constructive task, we cannot avoid concluding that in the constructive task, Oden's method does not lend itself to consistent repetition.

The Apologetic Task

In my analysis of the teleological condition in Oden's method, it becomes evident that his constructive efforts do not simply intend to woodenly restate the orthodox consensus. Indeed, as we have noted before, Oden expects the formulation of Christian teaching to incorporate "creative reflection in each varied sociocultural-historical situation."² In our postmodern situation, the apologetic task will require the clarification of Christian teaching in a way that can be appreciated and understood by contemporary persons both within and outside the faith. The same concern

¹Ibid., 393-4.

²Oden, The Living God, 368.
for contextualization underlies Oden's treatment of Tradition not as a frozen reality of the past, but as a lively, dynamic, vital reality along John Newman's idea of development.¹ Oden's own construal of this idea is "a conserving radicalism."²

The first thing to be noted about Oden and the ideal he sets forth in his method is how little contextualization he actually does. As Daniel Clendenin has observed, "Oden does little to help his readers with the necessary task of contextualization. He is most helpful exegeting the texts of the classical theologians, and least helpful in exegeting society and bringing the two together."³ Clendenin notes that the paucity of contextualization in Oden is not because he considers the task unimportant; rather, "it is simply a task he leaves to others."⁴ This is quite unsatisfactory because the absence of the effort at contextualization colors Oden's method as that which he categorically rejects, i.e., premodern. More importantly, it is only as Oden

¹Oden writes, "The heart of Newman's thought is that it is only through change that the church can remain the same. It is only through the living process of constant rebirth and reappropriation of the Christian tradition that the church can be the same, i.e., be itself, authentically renew the ancient tradition . . . This is why Newman is intriguing. He provides an original formular for the solution of the dilemma between archaism and sheer novelty" (After Therapy--What?, 70).

²Oden, Beyond Revolution, 62 ff.


⁴Ibid.
undertakes this task himself that his brand of postmodernism may be appreciated and taken with all the seriousness it deserves.¹

But Oden does not completely ignore the task of contextualization. I have already mentioned some instances where he does this. Thus on the doctrine of creation, we saw how he tinkers with theistic evolution while on the issue of miracles he attempts to redefine the "supernatural." On this issue the problem is the consistency with which Oden contextualizes and the selective principle which lies behind his approach.² It appears there is no consistent, guiding principle of contextualization.

If Oden has left others to undertake the apologetic task of contextualization as Clendenin suggests, is the task

¹Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., for example, has observed: "A leopard cannot change its spots. Nor, it seems, can a 'movement theologian' become overnight an interpreter of orthodoxy. Oden's rhetoric and mode of argumentation remains entirely that of the movement theologian he so decries. . . . 'Post-modern orthodoxy' is here more parodied than persuasively championed" (135).

²Brummett has made the same observation about what he calls "Oden's selective application of 'Newman's original formula.'" Thus he complains, "After 1979 Oden consistently argued, on the basis of classical ecumenical consensus, that theology is to be unoriginal and non-innovative. Postmodern theology's task, according to Oden, is the descriptive maintenance of classical orthodox consensus, which Oden insisted is to be determined by application of the Vincentian canon. When, however, that classical orthodox consensus did not support Oden's position regarding the role of women in the pastoral office, Oden argued that theology's task was no longer simply the descriptive maintenance of the apostolic tradition but the prescriptive mutation of that tradition. Cannot that application be made at other points?" (Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 279).
doable in the context of the structural conditions of Oden's method? Looking at his hermeneutical condition, his dynamic and progressive view of revelation could very easily be utilized to strike connections with contemporary society's preoccupation with dynamism and relativity. Similarly, Oden's material condition, which is shaped by his hermeneutical stance, incorporates elements that in many ways are postmodern. I have already mentioned Oden's dynamic and vital view of tradition. We may also recall Oden's wider definition of sources of theology besides the quadrilateral to include such sources as conscience, beauty, meditation, philosophy, and psychology. Together, these sources could provide experiential ground for faith in keeping with other extant revisionary theological approaches.

The fundamental structural problem that appears to stand in the way of contextualization, in Oden's method, is the tension between the progressive and conservative elements in his teleological condition. I have established that the goal of theology in Oden is to clarify the understanding of God held within the Christian community. Oden requires in addition that the understanding of God in the Christian community should reflect the classical orthodox consensus. At the same time Oden's teleological principle also intends a mutation of the tradition in the new socio-historical situation. But Oden's stronger
commitment to his agenda, to be unoriginal and non-innovative, weighs against the progressive element and strains any meaningful relationship between the conserving and progressing elements in his method. Thus, while his hermeneutical and material conditions are positioned to do a contextualizing apologetics, the unresolved tension in his teleological principle practically denies its possibility. This problem leaves Oden's method in a paradoxical situation: intending to be postmodern yet for the most part trapped in premodern orthodoxy. This is the case, moreover, because the conserving element of his teleological conditions spawns a corresponding critical task in his

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Ted Peters comments extensively on this problem in Oden in his view of *The Living God*. He observes: "The theological position of Oden is avowedly orthodox, which he defines as 'right opinion' or 'sound doctrine.' An opinion is orthodox, he rightly contends, if it is congruent with the apostolic faith. This is all well and good. However, Oden then does something surprising. He refers to his position as 'postmodern orthodoxy.' It is not modern theology, because modernity signals the 'historical dissolution' of Christian faith. It is rather postmodern because it is an attempt to retrieve the early Christian tradition which the modern mind has dissolved. 'Postmodern orthodoxy,' he tells us, 'is Christian teaching that, having passed through a deep engagement in the assumptions of modernity, has rediscovered the vitality of the ancient ecumenical tradition.' Now what should we make of this? I believe his definition of postmodern theology is in principle correct. . . . It returns to the ancient symbols, to be sure, but it interprets them in the light of contemporary consciousness. A postmodern method is not a simple return to the form of thinking prior to the rise of modernity. What we have in the Oden book, however, is not postmodern in this sense. It is rather a report of premodern thinking without any attempt to purge it of its dross through the fires of modern consciousness" (Peters, "The God of Classical Theism," 477-8).
method as activity, which equally frustrates the progressive impulse. To that critical task we now turn our attention.

The Critical Task

It bears recalling the point made earlier that the critical task in Oden involves the winnowing in and out of true and false teaching in the Christian community. Although Oden does not altogether downgrade the wisdom of the medieval Church and of the Reformation, the Christian consensus of the first five centuries plays a critical role in the definition of true Christian teaching. In his three-volume Systematic Theology, Oden has attempted to reflect the Christian consensual tradition on different theological loci on the basis of the Christian consensus of the first millennium as reflected in the councils and consensual teachers. In that sense, Oden's Systematic Theology provides us a tool for distinguishing true Christian teaching from the false. We will recall that in doing this task, Oden has employed the twin disciplines of irenics (to define the unifying center of Christian teaching) and polemics (to delineate the boundary of Christian teaching).

For Oden, the essential issue in this task is whether the consensus has not been misperceived.¹ Thus he pleads with his readers and critics to test his own fallibility in perceiving the consensus. If Oden has been

¹Oden, Life in the Spirit, 477.
misguided by his "own cultural assumptions" or "historical myopias of class biases," he hopes that critics and readers will help him to see. Thus for Oden, the consuming question regards how the consensus is being perceived. My evaluation of the critical task is, first, directed not to how the consensus is being perceived but rather to the more fundamental question of why the Christian consensus of the first five centuries should be accorded normative value at all. It is true that Oden, reflecting Tertullian, argues that the principle of ecumenical consent is to ensure that "the pliable metaphors of Scripture" may not be "perversely skewed by the sophistries of human wisdom" in order that the process of interpretation would not in time "become entirely balkanized and individualized, hence trivialized." Nevertheless, this does not answer the question whether true orthodoxy lodges with any particular historical period. If we grant the consensual premise of the first five centuries

1Ibid. Obviously, to do this is no mean task, requiring years of study and comparative reading. Oden observes that "those who doubt that such a consensus can exist must go through that lengthy process before a judgment can be made." Then he warns, "Lacking a decade of meditative reading would be like a judge rendering a verdict without ever reading the brief" (ibid.).

2Ibid., 483.

3Donald Bloesch's comments to this effect are noteworthy: "I wonder whether true orthodoxy can ever be associated with any one particular period in the history of the church. Is not the key to the recovery of orthodoxy a reappropriation of the gospel attested in the Holy Scripture rather than a return to any period in the past?", (Postmodern Orthodoxy," 393).
of Christian history, the question still remains as to whether consensuality necessarily translates into true orthodoxy.

Oden already anticipates this problem when he observes that some may find it objectionable "that in irenic theology the recurrent appeal seems to be not directly to truth or historical accuracy . . . but to consensuality of interpretation."¹ The issue is not completely settled by his "ecumenical assumption" that "consensuality under the guidance of the spirit comes closer to the truth of Christ than independent, individualistic rationality,"² because it conceals some facts of history.³ The fact that there have been theological errors, even during the first five centuries, and the fact of the philosophical presuppositions of the fathers demand, as Bloesch observes, that "even the venerable sayings and confessions of the early church"⁴ be

¹Oden, Life in the Spirit, 483.

²Ibid.

³Bloesch points out that "it was precisely in the first millennium of the church that a works-righteousness loomed as very significant that the great biblical doctrines of salvation by grace (sola gratia) and justification by faith alone (sola fide) were gravely compromised. . . . Do not we need to subject to critical scrutiny the philosophical presuppositions and accommodations of the Church Fathers, medieval doctors, and even the Reformers. . . . Oden nowhere speaks of the compromises evident in the philosophical theology of various Church Fathers, but it can be shown that they, too, were certainly not immune from the temptations of the modernity of their time (as surely Harnack recognised)" (Bloesch, "Postmodern Orthodoxy," 393).

⁴Ibid.
subjected to the judgment of Holy Scripture. It should be noted that, formally, Oden himself concedes this point.\(^1\) Yet the magisterial role which he accords the early classical consensus, resulting in what Brummett has described as his "hermeneutical reductionism," instrumentally prevents the tradition from being subjected to Holy Scripture.

The preceding remarks have been raised by asking why the consensus of the early Christian history should be accorded special normative value. Presently, a few comments on how Oden has perceived the consensus are in order. Oden's Systematic Theology is a reflection of his perception of the consensus. It is not a simple repetition of the consensus in the sense that his is a consensual theology that seeks to apply and defend the consensus. In applying the consensus to write an ecumenical, consensual theology, he has employed irenics which makes him into "something like a negotiator among parties in conflict."\(^2\) In the process he has listened to different Christian denominations and explored their differences, seeking to know "where they share the one body of Christ, yet with mutated languages and varied symbols and social forms and cultural formations."\(^3\)

\(^1\)Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 473.

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)Oden observes, "I have tried to listen carefully to Baptists and Catholics, Lutherans and Eastern Orthodoxy, charismatic Christians and those formed by the Gregorian
At the same time, Oden has attempted to avoid the danger of hypertolerance, maintaining that "the irenic task can go on properly only if accompanied by a realistic, calm, non-hysterical, reasoned polemical effort."¹

Between irenics and polemics, there remains a wide field to traverse. Irenics locates the center of the tradition, while polemics identifies the boundary. From the center to the boundary there exists a radical zone of inclusion whose determination, according to Oden, requires a well-formed theological temperament.² The range of requisites for the formation of this temperament is fairly extensive: "rigorous exegetical work, philological awareness, historical understanding, logical consistency, moral integrity, and a wide data base of perceptions of the current Zeitgeist."³

Herein lies the problem with the formation of "trustworthy judgments of proximate consensuality"⁴ as Oden conceives them. What hermeneutical presuppositions should

¹Ibid., 475.
²Ibid., 500-501.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., 500.
govern the preparatory exegetical, philosophical, and historical work that will undergird judgments of consensuality? How are the perceptions of the current Zeitgeist to be related to these judgments? Oden does not provide these hermeneutical and apologetic guidelines, so we are cast back to the initial hermeneutical and teleological problems that were discussed above. These matters call into question the practical value of Oden's method at least as a critical instrument for the determination of orthodoxy. The results of the application of these methodological principles in Oden's own work, according to him, are that it is odd.\(^1\) The oddity lies in the varied responses to his judgments of proximate consensuality.\(^2\) Oden explains these varied responses as the pigeonholing work of puzzled modern critics, but is it possible that this oddity also attests to

\(^1\)Ibid., 474.

\(^2\)The conflicting responses to Oden's work are dizzying as he recounts them. "Among evangelicals I experience myself as a very Catholic evangelical; among ecumenists I seem to be an old-fashioned antiquarian sort of ecumenist; among pietists I appear to be a very orthodox, bookish priest. Among liberation theologians I seem to be a narrowly scriptural sort of liberationist; among neoconservatives I appear to be at various times a rather archaic or Thomistic or classic liberal critic. Among liberal mainliners I am likely to be perceived as a liturgically conservative Anglo-Catholic Evangelical. . . . Among charismatics and Pentecostals I appear to be a very traditional Protestant believer in the witness of the Spirit. Among Armenians I may appear at times to be an old Reformed Protestant scholastic. . . . Among Christians I am a very pro-Jewish, pro-rabbinic Christian. Among Jews I have received a respectful hearing, with less confusion than among Christians" (ibid.).

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a practical difficulty in his method in fashioning a viable Protestant ecumenical consensual theology? This is the question I try to answer as I conclude this study.

Summary

As I bring this study to a conclusion, it seems appropriate that I present summarily what I have found throughout this research. I began by highlighting the issue of theological pluralism which has become an almost permanent feature of the contemporary theological landscape. I noted its genesis, its features and its supposed progress. It is into this pluralistic context that Thomas Oden is attempting to inject his postmodern orthodoxy as a way of bringing some measure of simplicity and unity to the theological enterprise. The method that he finds appropriate for this task is what he calls the Vincentian method, after the Vincentian Canon.

It has been the purpose of this study to examine whether a method so pre-modern in its genesis could be successfully applied in a postmodern Protestant context without self-contradiction. Oden’s life context as a former Bultmannian, but a present practitioner of paleo-orthodoxy, would appear to give credibility to the successful implementation of such a theological program. Thus I devote some time in chapter 2 describing Oden’s educational background and career interests as well as his remarkable shift from liberalism to orthodoxy. This exercise was
critical to understanding the context out of which Oden’s theological method arises.

The exposition of Oden’s method itself, however, required the application of a structure which could uncover the foundational principles upon which the method rests. To do this, I developed a structure that outlined the formal conditions of method as a concept through the method of logical analysis, and on the basis of Justus Buchler’s work on method as a concept. My analysis yielded four structural components of method as follows: hermeneutical conditions (epistemology, ontology and system), teleological condition (goal), material condition (data), and method proper (i.e., method as activity). The application of this structure to Oden’s thought which formed the basis of my descriptive analysis of Oden’s method in chapter 4, has revealed the foundational principles of Oden’s method with respect to his hermeneutical, teleological and material presuppositions. In other words, the application of the formal conditions of method developed in chapter 3 was applied to Oden’s thought to express his particular interpretation of these conditions in his Vincentian method.

In this final chapter, I have tried to evaluate Oden’s Vincentian method in terms of its inner consistency and coherence, with particular reference to its coherence with the classical orthodox consensus. As I bring the research to a close, it is time to ask again whether Oden’s
Vincentian method, so pre-modern in its provenance, can be successfully deployed in a postmodern Protestant context as a vehicle for theological unity. This is the question I try to answer as I conclude this study.

Conclusion

The resurgence of interest in tradition in contemporary Protestant theology as a resource in dealing with the pressures of pluralism created the initial interest for this study. Thomas Oden’s postmodern orthodoxy represents one serious attempt to bring the historic Christian tradition to bear on postmodern Protestant theologizing. This investigation into the possibility of tradition fulfilling its newly envisaged role in Protestant theology has led us to the analysis and description of the method on which Oden’s postmodern orthodoxy rests. Using the formal conditional structure of method developed in chapter 3 as an analytical tool, I described Oden’s method from the point of view of its hermeneutical (epistemological, ontological, and systemic), teleological, and material conditions. I also analyzed his method as an activity which involves several tasks. As we come to the end of this exercise, it will be helpful to draw some conclusions about the value of Oden’s postmodern orthodoxy for the contemporary pluralistic situation within the context of Protestant theology.
Oden’s consensual theology provides an extremely useful resource in its attempt to synthesize the "centrist" thinking of the Christian tradition on different theological loci. Furthermore, Oden’s consensual theology represents a notable attempt to bring the "centrist" tradition to bear on contemporary Protestant theology. Oden needs to be commended as one of the pioneers to raise the clarion call against what Clark Pinnock has called the "loss of tradition." Although the recognition is growing among Protestant theologians that tradition should play a valuable role in theology, few have gone to the extent of writing a complete Systematic Theology from the perspective of tradition. Oden has done this using his Vincentian method. Indeed he has even written books on pastoral theology on the basis of tradition. Oden’s efforts on these fronts are commendable and noteworthy. Yet Pinnock reminds us that, from a Protestant point of view, we must keep in mind two forces that threaten a wholesome rapprochement between tradition and contemporary Protestant theology. We must not only guard against the challenge of Roman Catholicism, which tends to subordinate Scripture to tradition; we must look

1Pinnock, "How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology," 3. Pinnock correctly observes that the loss of tradition represents a loss of a history of "heroic hermeneutical achievements" as well as a related lack of appreciation for historicity.

2Among Oden’s pastoral theologies see, Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition and Pastoral Theology.
out for the challenge of religious liberalism which may present new conceptions hostile to tradition as in some way original and Scriptural.

From these perspectives, how does Oden's Vincentian method stand? It is my view that as a means of bringing unity to the task of Protestant theology, Oden's method in its current state seems not particularly viable for Protestant theology in the postmodern situation. I draw this conclusion on the basis of three main reasons.

The first reason for the unviability of Oden's method for Protestant theology is a systematic one. As a method for Protestant theology, Oden's method fails to adequately protect the normative status of Scripture. From the hermeneutical perspective, my analysis revealed that Oden's concept of revelation fails to identify it with Scripture. Scripture is rather a witness to revelation.

1It is true that in the post-critical age, the Protestant Scripture Principle has come under considerable strain. See Carl E. Braaten, "Can We Still Hold the Principle of 'Sola Scriptura'," Dialog 20 (1981): 189-184; J. Christian Beker, "The Authority of Scripture: Normative or Incidental?" Theology Today 49 (1992): 376-382; Ted Peters, "Sola Scriptura and the Second Naivete," Dialog 16 (1977): 268-280; Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Crisis of the Scripture Principle," in Basic Questions in Theology, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 1:1-14. Nevertheless, as Graham Cole observes, while the principle may be conceived from three levels, depending on the limits one sets for it, "at the micro level (as source and norm of the kerygma), or at the macro level (as source and norm of both kerygma and wider doctrine), or lastly, at the mega level (as source and norm of kerygma, doctrine and Christian world view or metaphysics)," sola scriptura is still construed in positive terms (Graham Cole, "Sola Scriptura," The Churchman 104, no. 1 [1990]: 26).
This problem, which I have shown to be contrary to the classical position which Oden himself formally avows as the epistemological principle of Protestant theology, denies Scripture its distinctiveness and hence its normative status.\footnote{See Robert D. Preus, "The View of the Bible Held by the Church: The Early Church Through Luther," in Inerrancy, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 357-382.} Oden’s view of revelation, which is essentially neo-orthodox,\footnote{Oden tries to distance his post-modern orthodoxy from neo-orthodox. From the viewpoint of its teleological presupposition, Oden’s postmodern orthodoxy is clearly distinguished from neo-orthodoxy. Yet this does not necessarily preclude Oden from espousing a view of revelation that is Barthian and neo-orthodox (Agenda for Theology, 54-57).} is central to the material structure of his method. Since revelation is God’s self-disclosure in historic events, history, and hence tradition, becomes quite important for his method, thus de facto replacing Scripture’s traditional role.

As I have pointed out already, the historical understanding of revelation brings a certain fluidity to the concept of revelation which tends to blur the distinction between Scripture and tradition. This is already evident in Oden’s material condition where Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are all conceived as responsive to revelation. Indeed, while Oden in his treatment of the quadrilateral affirms the primacy of Scripture, this primacy is not translated into normativity. In his treatment of the
quadrilateral, Oden fails to give us sufficient clarity, in the words of Thomas Langford, on "what primacy means as dynamic interaction, what impingements and balances are to be sought, how each element conditions the other."¹ Theoretically, Oden agrees that the elements of the quadrilateral must be held in creative tension, taking care not to elevate one above the other. Yet the net result of his use of the quadrilateral is that tradition gains the upper hand over Scripture.

Tradition acquires normativity in Oden’s method first because of the fuzziness in his treatment of the relations in the quadrilateral, but more importantly because of his material condition. My analysis has shown that Oden’s practice of the method incorporates a magisterial use of tradition that leads to what Charles Brummett has called "hermeneutical reductionism."² To the extent that this hermeneutical reductionism denies the believer the possibility to interpret the biblical text under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a way other than already found in the classic consensus, tradition, not Scripture, becomes normative. Therefore, the combined operation of Oden’s hermeneutical and material conditions in Oden’s practice of the method prevents Scripture from being

¹Thomas Langford, "The United Methodist Quadrilateral," 240.

²Brummett, "Recovering Pastoral Theology," 281.

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normative, and hence makes it unviable in the contemporary pluralistic situation from the point of view of Protestant theology.

Second, apologetically, Oden’s method is not capable of dealing with contemporary pluralism so far. This is not a demand that is being placed on Oden’s method externally. As we noted in chapter 4, it is part of Oden’s teleological condition not to simply repeat the orthodox formular but to creatively reappropriate them in new socio-historical contexts. For this reason Oden expects a consensual theologian to have a well-formed theological temperament which, besides rigorous exegetical work and historical understanding, includes a wide database of perceptions of the current Zeitgeist.

Yet, methodologically, Oden fails to show how the "acute cross-cultural perception,"¹ which his consensual theological effort in theory aims at, may be actually incorporated into his method. Both the hermeneutical and material conditions in Oden’s method have a dynamic quality which stems from his historical understanding of revelation. Technically, from these perspectives, Oden’s method appears positioned to engage the postmodern situation.² His

¹Oden, Life in the Spirit, 500.

²Cf. the cultural-linguistic theological model of George Lindbeck (32 ff.), which is shaped by sociological and philosophical values not altogether different from those that shape Oden’s philosophy of history, community, and sociology of orthodoxy. See for example, Oden, Agenda for
sociology of orthodoxy and tradition-maintenance as well as his idea of historical reasoning all fit very well into his hermeneutical and material conditions. Yet in this apologetic task the lack of a correlational principle for cross-cultural transmission, which we noted above, often limits Oden’s method to static repetitions of classical orthodoxy. Furthermore, Oden’s hermeneutical reductionism not only displaces Scripture’s normativity, it stifles the dynamic elements in Oden’s method, especially his vital view of tradition, and prevents them from getting expressed. Consequently, Oden’s method is incapable of engaging the contemporary Zeitgeist, without self-contradiction, and hence is of little help for facing theology’s pluralistic situation.

The third reason for the unviability of Oden’s postmodern orthodoxy is a structural problem. There appears to be a real, fundamental, structural difficulty with fashioning a postmodern, ecumenical Protestant theology on the foundation of the classical consensus of the first millennium of Christian teaching.

Putting aside questions about the legitimacy and arbitrariness of the normative value of the first millennium of Christian history, it seems to me that the successful

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*Theology, 90 ff.*

1 Oden, *Agenda for Theology,* 90 ff.

2 Oden, *The Living God,* 390 ff.
implementation of such a theological program will necessarily require the reinterpretation of the foundational principles of classical orthodoxy in a way that will make them compatible with those of postmodernity. Postmodern epistemology and ontology do not coincide with those of classical orthodoxy. This is why it is strongly argued by such theologians as Stanley Grenz that a postmodern evangelical theology requires a revisioning not merely of the nature of theology's task, but also of its hermeneutical and material principles as well.¹

If this revisionary premise for postmodern theology is accepted,² it will be instructive to explore how it will play out in the formation of the theological temperament which Oden sets forth as prerequisites for doing consensual theology. We have already noted that these prerequisites include rigorous exegetical work, historical understanding, philological awareness, as well as cross-cultural perception. Should the revisioning of the hermeneutical conditions and sources of theology and biblical authority will be required, what hermeneutical presuppositions will undergird the revisioned exegetical, philological,


historical, and cross-cultural awareness informing the requisite theological temperament? How is the contemporary Zeitgeist to be incorporated in the method? These questions raise further complicated methodological problems that Oden’s method does not address.
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