Introduction to David F. Ford,
"'The Best Apologetics Is Good Systematics.'
A Proposal about the Place of Narrative in
Christian Systematic Theology"

Jason A. Fout*

David F. Ford (b. 1948) served as Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge from 1991. He became emeritus in 2015; given his many continuing activities, one hesitates to say that he "retired." Prior to his time at Cambridge, he taught at the University of Birmingham (from 1976), and it is from that era that this essay comes.

Originating in a paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion conference in Chicago in 1984, this is one of Ford's first published essays. In it, he explores a typology of three categories: system, story, and performance. He contends that these perspectives on Christian and human identity are each important for systematic theology, but that "story" has a key role in relation to the other two. Ford's onetime teacher Hans Frei lurks in the wings, as Ford suggests that the "middle distance" perspective on reality afforded by "realistic narrative" provides the most basic context for the other two perspectives: the biblical narratives, and especially the Gospel stories of Jesus Christ, properly take their place at the center.

Looked at from one perspective, the essay works to nuance George Lindbeck's postliberal "cultural-linguistic" theory of religion through engaging with the work of Iris Murdoch and J. P. Stern: a modest, scholarly endeavor. But from another angle, this is a wider engagement with implications for theology, Bible, life, church, worship, ethics, and much else. This is characteristic of much of Ford's writing. He does not rest content with simply commenting on other thinkers, or coloring within tidy disciplinary lines. Theology, to borrow from Ford's longtime conversation partner (and father-in-law)

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* Jason A. Fout is associate professor of Anglican theology at Bexley Seabury Seminary Federation in Chicago, Illinois, and Co-Editor in Chief of the *Anglican Theological Review*. His doctoral thesis was supervised by David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy.

Daniel W. Hardy, ought to strive to do justice to "God, and God's ways with the world." It ought also to take seriously the shape of life of the one who lives before the face of God.

These two concerns underlie Ford's book, entitled *Jubilate: Theology in Praise,*[1] coauthored with Hardy, which he refers to several times in the text. Published the year before this essay originally appeared, the book arose from years of conversation between the two theologians, and sought to relate praising and knowing God. It looks at the whole of Christian faith and life through the lens of human praise of God, exploring the intrinsic logic of the praise that God evokes from us. Alongside the encompassing nature of the subject matter, it also features an unmistakable note of joy uncommon in academic theology.

The present essay's enduring value is twofold. First, for those with a specialist interest in postliberal theology, it offers a salient correction of one aspect of George Lindbeck's influential theory of religion. But well beyond this, the essay models well the possibility of a careful, somewhat technical scholarly engagement being put in service to a vibrant faith in the living God.

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[1]   David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), later revised and updated as *Living in Praise: Worshiping and Knowing God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005.)

"The Best Apologetics Is Good Systematics."
A Proposal about the Place of Narrative in Christian Systematic Theology

David F. Ford*

This paper takes three basic categories through which human and Christian identity can be conceived: system, story, performance. It is suggested that in Christian systematic theology "story" has a key role, inseparable from the form and content of the Christian stories, especially the Gospels. These are realistic narratives with a "middle distance" (cf. J. P. Stern, *On Realism*) perspective on reality, and this is the primary perspective for Christian community, worship, revelation, history, eschatology, and ethics. This implies a critique of any position in which primacy is given to the other categories or to another type of story. It also is congruent with Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" theory of religion. Yet both "system" and "performance" must be in continual, critical interaction with "story" if it is to maintain its rational, moral, and spiritual integrity, and in this exchange apologetics takes place. The "performance," at the cutting edge of the story, has three main dynamics: praise and prayer; community life; and prophecy in word and action. Each of these is accompanied by "journeys of intensification" in theology. Systematic theology tries to take

* David F. Ford OBE is Emeritus Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Selwyn College. He is Founding Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme; as well, he cofounded the Society for Scriptural Reasoning, a group of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars who gather in mutual hospitality to read and reflect on each others' scriptures. Among his publications are *Self & Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and *The Future of Christian Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). He is presently working on a theological commentary on the Gospel of John. He has served as theological advisor to three Archbishops of Canterbury including Justin Welby, the present archbishop. He also serves as cochair of the Rose Castle Foundation, which is dedicated to equipping a new generation of reconciling leaders from around the world to be mediators, advocates, and peacemakers.

account of all this in focusing on the traditional "loci" of theology, in which it seeks to arrive at a systematic particularity of the story—past, present, and future.

I. System, Story, Performance

Miss Murdoch's plea that she is not a philosophical novelist is a variant of Beckett's; an attempt to forestall the tactical reductionism of critics, who need to isolate a theme and gain a point of vantage on the work. Hence her repudiation of "readings" which merely catch allusions, deploy appropriate names, seek out contexts from her own philosophical essays, and exaggerate her affinity with the existentialists.

What is side-stepped in such readings is the problem of philosophically evaluating a Murdoch novel's "strong, agile realism" (to use her own phrase). That realism is an attempt, subject to the formal constraints without which the novel could not be a work of art, to capture truth in all its contingency, and to avoid the consoling artifice of theory, myth or dream. It is an attempt to tear aside the net which necessarily allows us only an impoverished view of the world. Yet for Miss Murdoch the writing of the novel does not resemble the philosopher's attempt to arrive at truth. In its multiplicity of functions, its characteristic style, its sensuality and indirectness, the novel is wholly different from the philosophical treatise.

This does not mean that her novels have no worthwhile philosophy. It means rather that they are best equipped to incarnate a philosophy which a treatise could not adequately set down. For Murdoch novels convey the theory that no theory (including those in her own philosophical essays) is ever adequate. The struggle to arrive at truth, or at the Good (a Platonic vocabulary is inevitable here) is mainly a struggle to discern, accurately and lovingly, the detail of how things are. Neither truth nor goodness are susceptible of prior specification; and the "dryness" Miss Murdoch finds in much contemporary philosophy and literature reflects

the impoverished preconception of human agency which they share.[1]

Peregrine Horden's account of Iris Murdoch's position as a professional philosopher and novelist has within it an indication of the basic categories of this paper: system or theory; realistic narrative; and human agency or performance. Murdoch's way of interrelating system, story, and performance is also broadly in line with what will be proposed later, and her philosophy and novels are part of the ecology that sustains this paper.

Thomas Mann's novels raise similarly profound questions about those interrelationships, which are elucidated by J. P. Stern in a paper entitled "Relativity in and around *The Magic Mountain*":

> If we now try to answer the central question of this paper— What is radically new about *The Magic Mountain*?—we get three closely connected answers, all intimately bound up with Mach's critique of false abstractions and Einstein's notion of relativity. The relativizing of the concept of absolute time is, first, part of the theorizing conducted by the characters in the novel; secondly, it is part of the experience recounted; and, thirdly—and here we are moving from physics and philosophy back into literary criticism—relativity enters the narrative structure of the story itself.[2]

There is theorizing within the novel, and theory also informs the narrative structure; experience and the decisions of living are recounted, and the whole novel mediates to the reader the possibility of a transformation of knowledge into experience and action; and the narrative incorporates a double-movement, one offering a consecutive story-line of events *nacheinander*, the other offering a simultaneous, *nebeneinander* view. Informing all of this, Stern suggests, is a sophisticated understanding of time which, with the help of Einstein and other contemporary influences, combines the linear and the

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[1] "Philosophical Fictions," Introduction to *The Novelist as Philosopher: Modern Fiction and the History of Ideas,* ed. Peregrine Horden, Chichele Lectures 1982 (Oxford: All Souls College, 1983), xi.

[2] Ibid., 63.

simultaneous. Yet the time of the novel is relative to two "fictionally achieved absolutes," the moral strength and spirit of Hans Castorp, and his dutiful response to the course of contemporary history.

I will return to Mann later; for the present, the relevant point is that, in his own very different way, he is concerned with issues tackled by Murdoch and that these may be appropriately categorized under the headings of system, story, and performance. Both also suggest that "story" might have a certain primacy, albeit relative, inclusive and co-inherent with other modes. Each of the categories is clearly relevant to the rendering of human identity. A person may be described in systematic, theoretical terms using the natural or human sciences or some other approach through linguistic analysis, epistemology, ontology, or theology. Some of these are highly selective and specialist in their interest, others are more synthetic and concerned to unite a variety of approaches as systematically as possible.

The same person who has been the subject of physical, biochemical, genetic, psychological, sociological, anthropological, economic, political, ecological, philosophical, and theological interest may also be indicated through telling stories. These too have many possible levels and aspects, ranging from a focus on the "stream of consciousness," through varieties of realism and of fantasy focussing on an individual, to the larger stories of family, community, culture, nation, religion, civilization, species, and even cosmos.

Yet there is also the "cutting edge" of the person's story, the living of a life now in which the factors described by systematic and narrative means are taken up into new speech, action, suffering, and events. This "performance" of life is often characterized by concentration on key relationships, commitments, visions, and particular experiences in such a way that, while the systems and the narratives help to inform and direct, these are overflowed and opened up for a different "ecology" of life and a new future.

The main ways of conceiving Christian identity can be related to the same categories and their interrelations. Christian theologians could also be "typed" according to them—some take story or history as their leading category, others specialize in systematic theoretical understanding, and others are rigorously existential in their focus on present performance. Most systematic theologians try to combine the three in some sort of synthesis, but, within that, need to take crucial decisions about their relative importance and modes of interaction. My paper is one proposal about how this should be done.

II. *Christianity's Middle-Distance Realism*

Traditionally, Christian systematic theology has been deeply involved with narrative. Each major locus can be seen as an attempt to do justice to the whole overarching story from the standpoint of one event or stage within it: election as God's conception of the story, followed by creation, sin and evil, providence, redemption (including Christology and soteriology), pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. The doctrine of the Trinity embraces the whole, pointing to knowledge and love of God as the *raison d'être* of it all. The Bible was understood typologically, with everything converging on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that central, inclusive story was at the heart of Christian life, worship, creeds, and doctrine.

In much narrative theology, there has been a great deal of discussion of the contention that the "realistic narrative" form of the Gospels is inseparable from their meaning. The meaning is, it is claimed, an inextricable combination of form and content, in which characters and events are rendered cumulatively in temporal sequence through words, actions, sufferings, and occurrences, and their complexity, individuality, and particularity can only be grasped as they unfold through the story.[3] As Horden says of Murdoch, they try "to capture truth in all its contingency," and Christianity has accorded to their message about contingent events a remarkable importance. George Lindbeck has proposed a "cultural-linguistic" theory of religion that allows one to do justice both to this distinctive feature of Christianity and also to the distinctiveness of other religions and ways of living, without in the process becoming committed to an extreme relativism as regards truth.[4] I want to explore some of the consequences for Christian systematic theology of taking seriously both Lindbeck's theory of religion and the centrality in Christianity of the testimony to Jesus Christ in realistic narrative form.

My way into this is through trying to conceptualize something of the distinctiveness that results from the Gospels playing the role they do in Christianity. The key concept is borrowed from J. P. Stern's

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[3] See my own discussion, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the "Church Dogmatics"* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981, 1985), esp. chap. 4; also David Ford, "Barth's Interpretation of the Bible," in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method,* ed. S. W. Sykes (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979), 55–87.

[4] See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1984, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

intense and elegant work *On Realism*.[5] It is the idea of the "middle distance" perspective. This is the primary perspective of literary realism as Stern (here in the tradition of Auerbach's *Mimesis*) defines it. The middle distance is that focus which best does justice to the ordinary social world of people in interaction. It portrays them acting, talking, suffering, thinking, and involved in institutions, societies, and networks of relationships over time; in general this perspective renders, in the words of my opening quotation, "the detail of how things are."[6] The perspective and the content go together. If one moves too close and allows the dominant perspective to become, for example, one person's inner world or stream of consciousness, then the middle distance has been supplanted. Likewise, if one takes too broad an overview and subsumes the particular people, words, and actions into a generalization, a trend, or a theory, the middle distance loses its own integrity and becomes, at best, evidence or supportive illustration. This is by no means to imply that interiority or generalization or many other perspectives are incompatible with the middle-distance perspective. Rather it is a matter of primacy and balance, which writers as diverse as the Evangelists, Iris Murdoch, and Thomas Mann all observe in their various ways.

There are also epistemological implications of the concept of the middle distance. One of these concerns is the level of precision appropriate to conveying the truth about people in their social world. The truth that most matters is not usually that of detailed information of an exactness appropriate to other investigations (such as precise medical description—though Mann shows with what effect this can be used when subsumed into the realism of *The Magic Mountain*), but is the sort of portrayal that neither loses the wood through examining each tree too closely nor embarks on a systematic ecology of the whole region. It is quite possible to convey truth adequately with a middle-distance precision while yet being wrong or misleading in many details and subscribing to doubtful general ideas about the world. It is clearly of great importance for Christianity that the testimony to Jesus Christ is in the form of realistic narratives which,

[5]   (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).
[6]   Although, of course, the status of this "are" is open to endless possible qualification and even subversion—Iris Murdoch's eminently realistic novel *The Black Prince* (London: Penguin, 1975), for example, concludes with a set of postscripts that throw radical suspicion on the way the reader was led to understand the story in the course of reading it. Cf. below on the "realism of assessment."

in their very diversity of detail and modes of generalization, seem to underline the middle-distance identification of Jesus (supremely in his passion, death, and resurrection) as the primary thrust of their witness.

There is a further, wider epistemological implication of the primacy of the middle-distance perspective in that it is a type of reference which tries to mediate both realism and idealism. If the primary emphasis of realism is seen to be on our knowing as receptive, corresponding to reality, and that of idealism on our knowing as constructive, conceiving and structuring the coherence of reality, then middle-distance realism can be seen to affirm both together.[7] A realistic narrative is both a "finding" and a "fashioning," whether it tend more to the historical or more to the fictional. It is a task for fascinating investigation and discussion to explore just how the two may combine and generate tension, contradiction, depth, or illumination in any particular case, but their copresence is part of what is meant by literary realism, and the masters of the art illustrate the fact that, when it comes to rendering people in middle-distance perspective, the ability to "find" and the ability to "fashion" are both stretched to capacity in an effort to do justice to reality. Solzhenitsyn writes both history and fiction in his effort to convey the truth of Russia before, during, and since the rule of Stalin, and it would be quite a trivial notion of truth that would condemn his fiction as failing to be truthful just because of its inability to meet certain criteria of correspondence.[8] It is partly his mastery of fiction that enables him to be such an adequate witness. Realism is neither naturalism nor fantasy but an amalgam that may draw on either end of that spectrum to produce a new whole which may "ring true" in ways that are not verifiable or falsifiable by criteria appropriate to other modes and perspectives.

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[7] Cf. Donald Mackinnon, "Idealism and Realism: An Old Controversy Renewed" and "The Conflict between Realism and Idealism: Remarks on the Significance for the Philosophy of Religion of a Classical Philosophical Controversy Recently Renewed," in *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM, 1979).

[8] On Solzhenitsyn in relation to the Gospels see Ford, *Barth and God's Story,* 65–71. On "historicity" (which has much in common with Stern's "middle distance") as the crossover point where history and fiction intersect, see Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* ed., trans., and introduced by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1981), 274–96. Ricoeur's notion of the mode of reference of fiction to reality is one way of showing how "finding" and "fashioning" may be combined. For Stern's way of making a similar point see *On Realism,* 116ff.

So far I have implied that realism is a descriptive mode, but in ordinary life "realistic" is more commonly applied to decisions, judgments, evaluations, and assessments. The meaning tends towards the pragmatic and even the cynical, and is mainly concerned with what is conceived to be actually possible in a particular situation. As Stern says,

> "Realistic" is the word that expresses the likelihood of a successful translation of talk and thought into another mode of experience, into the mode of action (which of course does not have to be bereft of talk to be another mode of experience). And it is this translatability, this duality of modes within "life" that distinguishes it from literature. . . . Literature . . . is all one field. It is all one medium and knows no translation into another. It may tarry over description to its heart's content, it may play with description and with assessment too.[9]

Stern makes two main points about the realism of assessment, both of them vital to my conception of the role of the Gospels in Christian theology. The first is that, for all the descriptive realism in a particular story, it may be that this is accompanied by an assessment (which may not be at all explicit but may be conveyed by events, juxtapositions, or twists to the story) that qualifies the way in which that reality is understood, even to the point of radical novelty or questioning. Kafka is an extreme example of a writer using meticulously realistic description of apparently ordinary reality, but in the service of a whole which is terrifyingly inhuman, alienating, and destructive. He plays what Stern calls an "endless cat-and-mouse game with realism"[10] in which the familiar, often banal stuff of common life has superimposed upon it a negative transcendental evaluation. The Gospels are also written in the light of a transcendental evaluation, embodied in the climactic events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They offer a verdict on Jesus and the story of his life in a way that challenges other claims to reality, expressing in narrative form an ultimate or eschatological message—one that claims primacy for this person in a final way. Because testimony to this person is inseparable from what he said and did and what happened to him, the middle-distance realism

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9   Ibid., 139f.
10   Ibid., 135.

of the Gospels is especially appropriate. In literary terms, the role of the resurrection in the story might even be seen to be an affirmation of the primacy of this perspective. If this man is alive again, raised from the dead by God and rightly called "Lord," then the primary perspective on reality must be one that best helps to identify and recognize him. The most urgent, practical matter will of course be to arrive at the right assessment of him (and here the debate about the titles, of Jesus in the early church is relevant), but that in turn is inevitably linked with something more descriptive, the need for which is likely to increase as the message has to be recorded, explained, and justified for a wider audience, including the next generation of Christians. Even Paul, the New Testament writer often seen as least interested in the story of Jesus, draws on the climactic events of last supper, passion, death, and resurrection.[11]

This leads to the second point about the realism of assessment: it pivots between life and literature in a way that helps to translate one mode of experience into another. In terms of my categories, it points to the relationship between "story" and "performance." Paul's letters are obviously oriented mainly to "performance," showing the practical realism of someone facing pressing issues calling for verdicts and decisions, but they include much supporting "realism of description," with a great deal more presupposed. Their overall perspective is undoubtedly that of the middle distance, with the purposes of God linked mainly neither with inner experience of growth nor with general statements of belief or world-view but with what happens between people living in the worshipping community of the church with a calling in the world that has its principal implications in a way of life that demonstrates faith, hope, and love.

The Gospels, on the other hand, are oriented mainly to telling the story of Jesus and so are predominantly descriptive, but, as a great deal of modern scholarship has shown, they are shot through with

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[11]   Richard B. Hays illuminates the intrinsic relationship between Paul's letters and the Gospel story in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3.1–4.11* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983). Hays's conclusions help to support the main argument of the present paper as regards the interrelation of story with doctrine and performance, e.g., "The significant point with regard to Pauline ethics is this. The narrative substructure provides the 'logic' which links the paraenetic section of Galatians to the theological exposition of the central section. Interpreters of Paul have always found it difficult to explain how his ethic is grounded in his theology, this study poses the possibility that both are grounded in his Gospel story" (264).

evaluations and definite theological positions so that it becomes virtually impossible to separate a descriptive "Jesus of history" from an evaluated "Christ of faith." As Stern analyses literary realism, the very attempt to do this is doomed to failure or triviality, and what one is most likely to succeed in doing is to replace the middle-distance realism of the Gospels with another genre (perhaps a naturalism that seeks for the "bare facts," perhaps a *Bildungsroman* that tries to reach through to Jesus' individual consciousness and development, perhaps even a form of socialist realism that attempts a materialist account of Jesus in the context of the social, economic, and cultural forces of his time). There is nothing objectionable in the use of more than one genre, but what may be disputed is the attempt to reduce one to another, especially if this violates the genre that was in fact considered most appropriate by the early church. The Gospels must by no means be invulnerable to criticism,[12] but they must be defended against misconstruals that judge them by inadequate criteria. They are, as I construe them, realistic narratives written in the middle-distance perspective in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and this verdict embodied in the crucified and risen Lord not only is the clue to the distinctive reality rendered by the Gospels but also lies at the heart of Christian "performance" in worship, community, prophecy, and mission.

The temporal dimension of the middle-distance perspective is also important. In the course of living, judgments and decisions are being made continually in relation to the immediate situation, but the imperatives of immediacy have their context in the indicatives of history, horizon, expectation, and key relationships. A mature descriptive realism informed by seasoned assessment is unlikely to be possible except over a period of years, especially if the subject matter is of deep and wide significance. This is the case with the Gospels, and they show the other aspects of the middle-distance perspective, already mentioned, in combination with a temporal perspective that is neither too close to the people and events of which they tell, nor so far distant in time that one loses their realistic particularity and what Dame Helen Gardner, writing of Mark's Gospel, calls "the 'Here and Now' of our daily experience, the 'Then and There' of memory, by which I do not mean

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[12]   See below, section IV.

detailed precision of testimony, but the deep sense of 'happening'."[13] As the Christian church developed, it authorized these classic accounts whose perspective both enabled its distinctive message to be communicated and implicitly claimed primacy over other perspectives on the narrative content of Christian faith.

One danger facing a theology that gives narrative an important role is that it becomes too exclusively literary and also too exclusively interpersonal in its conception of reality. This could easily be the case with the idea of the middle distance, so that it is worth concluding my introduction of the concept by indicating briefly how it transcends the literary and the constriction to human relationships. One way of showing this is to follow through its implications for a systematic understanding of reality in the general terms of an ontology. The doctrine of the Trinity and its accompanying philosophical elucidations might be seen as the main patristic and medieval attempt to do this. In this there was a determination to try to do justice to the extraordinary belief in a God who becomes man and takes part in this story. That was the explosive, revolutionary conception which helped to transform the understanding of God, cosmos, and human reality together, and is eloquently summed up in the final canto of Dante's *Paradiso*. There Dante's celebration of the Christian medieval cosmology and ontology, in the course of a story that is consistently middle-distance in primary perspective, reaches its climax in the vision of God, at the culmination of which is the human face of Christ, transcending all categories and understanding.

One result of the disintegration of the medieval world-view was the emergence of a plurality of new systems, overarching stories, forms of praxis and of subjectivity. Within the medieval "great chain of being" the Gospel stories, for all their transformative influence, had taken their place in a hierarchical universe. With the end of this, the Gospels were vulnerable to being subsumed into many other frameworks, most of which gave primacy to perspectives other than that of

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[13] "The Poetry of St. Mark," in *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 118. An instructive contemporary example of the temporal distance that seems best suited to the sort of testimony that the Gospels offer is seen in *Mister God, This Is Anna* by Fynn (London: Collins, 1974). The author recounts, thirty years later, a short period of Anna's life focussing on incidents which have, over the years, crystallized into pericope form. There are, of course, many differences from the Gospels, but the relation of temporal distance to the attainment of a classic description informed by matured judgment is instructive.

the middle distance. Whereas the medieval system had at least given a firm place to the events of the Gospels, even though the metaphysical framework tended to domesticate them and to inhibit the drawing of certain radical implications (for example, concerning the passibility of God), now there was no such guarantee of their cosmic significance, and many ways of calling it in question. This was part of a wider crisis of the middle distance, which yet remained, of course, the principal perspective in which most ordinary reality was seen.[14] In literature, realistic novels especially tried to affirm its importance, and continue to do so, but their genre has been under great strain (well described by Stern) and has often failed to maintain the precarious balance of elements which makes up that middle distance. However the modern situation is construed, it is clearly on the whole far from hospitable to traditional claims for the importance of what is told in the Gospels, and the effort to conceive Christian truth demands the labor of a plausible ontology as part of the testimony to the Gospel from a systematic perspective. That ontology cannot be content with a personalism which ignores the problems of conceiving space, time, creation, and history in a post-Enlightenment, post-Einsteinian way, and it needs to be able to offer an understanding of the proportionality and dynamics of reality such that the Gospel content and perspective make broad rational sense. As this is attempted by some modern theologians one can begin to see the liberating, radical possibilities for understanding the Gospel and other reality together in our situation, so that the positive contribution of what is distinctively modern can be appreciated.[15]

Besides the elaboration of an ontology, another way of developing the concept of middle-distance realism beyond the narrowly literary and interpersonal is to concentrate on some aspect of "performance"

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[14] Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958), makes what could be seen as a sustained and sophisticated plea for the recovery of a true middle-distance perspective in the realm of historical action. She suggests that modern alienation is the result of a "twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" (6f). Both "earth" and "world" are used in almost technical senses explained elsewhere in the book.

[15] For example, Jürgen Moltmann and Thomas Torrance both, though in very different ways, offer an ontology sharply contrasting with medieval systems, highly critical of modern tendencies to retreat into subjectivity or the interpersonal, and completely trinitarian. Moltmann's leading category is "history" (inextricable from "performance"), while Torrance specializes more in "theory," but each maintains, with radical ontological results, the primacy of the Gospel story and especially the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

which includes activities and relationships not exhaustively describable in literary or personalist terms. One such way would be through an ethic that uses central concepts such as responsibility, representation, or suffering. Another would be through the relationship to God in praise, which a co-author and I have attempted recently.[16]

However it is worked out in detail, the middle-distance perspective with content centering on the story of Jesus appears to be vital for the self-description of Christianity. Christian worship is principally neither an affirmation of general truths nor an interior state of communion of the soul with God (or any other relationship which is primarily definable in terms of individual experience, awareness, or consciousness, though these are of course involved), but it is rather a social meal and word-centered communication informed by the key events of the Christian story. Christian initiation is the taking on, in a particular community, of an identity determined by the death and resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Likewise revelation, reconciliation, and salvation are conceived as "through Jesus Christ" so that revelation, for example, is not first of all a system of truths or an illumination of individual minds and hearts but is "the word made flesh" inseparable from the telling of a particular story. The Christian ethic of love likewise makes the middle-distance perspective primary, in contrast to such possibilities as a system of laws and principles or the attainment of a special state of consciousness or self-development.

The approach to the future too is greatly affected by the perspective and content of the Gospel stories. The first Christians lived in an apocalyptic age, with much radical speculation about the future. Might it not be that one important reason why the delay of the parousia caused no apparent crisis in the community was that the distinctively Christian understanding of the future was increasingly seen to lie not in an ability to date the end of the world but in an affirmation that hope was to be focussed through Jesus Christ, as identified by the Gospels, which were written as this belief became clearer? The practical consequence of this was to lead a life that pivoted round faith in Jesus Christ, and, as regards the future, was mainly concerned neither with long-term or comprehensive plans or speculations, nor with the

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[16]   Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984); US ed., *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985). Cf. below, section III.

destiny of one's own soul, but rather with the celebration of worship together, the building up of Christian community, and various sorts of prophetic action and communication in the world. The resurrection, as the great sign of hope, acted as a seal on the ultimacy of Jesus Christ as the content of hope, and so established also the primacy of the perspective of the middle distance.

III. Performance

At the cutting edge of history there is the thrust of present speech, action, suffering, and thought, all involved in the many processes that make up the ecology in which we exist. In this, people formed through the whole of their history up to this point take part in carrying it further, as all the elements converge in the present. Here middle-distance realism helps to orient one within that in the middle of which one is actually living, and it is the assessment aspect of evaluations and decisions leading to response and action which is more prominent than the realism of description, and may assume various relationships to it. I call this movement in the historical present "performance," though I am not completely satisfied with the term. It is an attempt to indicate a process in which *lexis* and *praxis* are the main focus and in which dramatic and narrative content is taken seriously.[17]

Performance is a "hot" concept pointing to a concentration and coinherence of relationships, levels, and elements in a simultaneity which has its own integrity and is not exhaustively represented in the cooler examination through systematic study of the narrative shaped into some linear sequence. Both "system" and "story" must be used to try to discern the truth of the performance that has been and is taking place and to help in further performance, while recognizing that what happens in true human performance has the characteristic which systems thinking reaches after in its concept of "the open system" and historical thinking affirms in its orientation to "the contingent future." The complex coinherence in performance of past, present, and future, and of thought, feeling, and action, within the web of relationships in the ecology of life as focussed at the particular point in time,

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17   Hannah Arendt (*Human Condition,* esp. Chap. V) develops a concept of action within a broader understanding of performance and links it to "story" and "drama. " She tries to do justice both to existentialist insights into distinctively human freedom and potential and to the spheres of labor, industry, science, technology, and, above all, politics.

defies any overview or representation by a single method or genre. What is the best way for theology to grapple with what is involved here? David Tracy's phrase "journey of intensification" is helpful in suggesting a way that differs from the systematic and the narrative modes and that tries to handle the intensity of the concentrated convergence that happens in performance. A journey of intensification, in my usage, follows through one mode of performance in its manifold implications, and things can be learnt and new performance enabled by such a single-minded journey which would not be possible without it. In theology the "hottest" work is often of this sort, such as liberation theologies, various types of spirituality, or other strongly directive and transformative proposals. It is the following through of one type of performance, and this may include consideration of the theoretical and historical dimensions as well as the practical and future-oriented.

In Christian theology I see three dynamics of performance in line with the content and middle-distance realism of the Gospel story in its Old Testament and New Testament context. The first is that of active relationship with God most explicit in worship. The second is that of life together in a community of faith and love. The third is that of prophetic speech and action in witness, evangelism, and dedication to peace, justice, and goodness.[18] These are all clearly coinherent, but consideration of them in depth is often best done through a specialist journey of intensification concentrating on one, or one aspect of one, of them. Theology of this type tends to stress the need for self-involvement if one is to understand its message, encouraging one to learn prayer by doing it in certain ways and with a certain understanding, to learn Christian community by living in it and by participating in its thinking, language, and behavior, to learn to witness by engaging in it, and to learn the way to peace and justice by advocating and incarnating them.

In any such theology there will be many issues raised from the direction of thinking in terms of "system" and "story," and much theology can be formally differentiated according to how these issues are

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[18]   In the New Testament these dynamics are pervasively present, both explicitly (clearest in Acts, in Paul's Corinthian and Roman correspondence, in John's Gospel, and in Revelation) and also implicitly, as a great deal of scholarship about the worship, community, and mission of the early church shows. On the relation of the Gospel narrative to Paul, and especially to Galatians, see Hays, *Faith*. His conclusion is that "Paul's language enacts the ongoing destiny of the foundational story because he sees himself and his churches as agents within the story's final sequence" (266).

handled. Some, such as the existentialists, recommend their "performance" in sharp criticism of the tendency of any system or narrative to exercise the wrong sort of control, inappropriate to the freedom of true Christian living. Others, such as certain liberation theologians and advocates of neo-conservatism, see their *praxis* as the appropriate response to the call of God in a situation which is understood in terms of a clear view of history and where it is heading, often supported by a systematic analysis. But one says very little about these and the many other positions by such formal generalizations. Their intensity, concentration, and practicality are only done justice by an appropriately holistic engagement and response, and the inescapability of the issue of one's own performance invites one into a corresponding journey of intensification.

My position on the interrelation of the other two modes with that of performance is that the systematic questions are unavoidable and need to be thoroughly pursued, and that the story-related questions require a similarly specific attention. The barrenness of that statement indicates that the major need is to do this theology rather than talk about what needs to be done or the method of doing it or the criteria for judging it. *Praising and Knowing God*[19] is an attempt to do this by thinking through the activity of praising God. It is theology done in a middle-distance perspective from the standpoint of the performance of praise, and it relates this to the Gospel story, the Old Testament, the history of the Christian tradition, and other history. It discusses the history of theology using the praise of God as a hermeneutical key,[20] and attempts a "system"[21] in line with the rest of the book.

IV. System

The system in *Praising and Knowing God* is just one of a large family of systematic enterprises that includes those mentioned in section I above. They have multiplied in recent centuries, and their rigorous development has profoundly changed theology. Their subject matter has embraced other systems and all that comes under the headings of "story" and "performance." They have been analytic and synthetic, critical and constructive in varying degrees. They have also

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[19]   See n. 16 above.
[20]   Ibid., Appendix B.
[21]   Ibid., Appendix A.

been controversial, and the obvious dangers of systematizing in theology, such as the tendencies to adopt totalitarian overviews or to reduce the content in the interests of supporting a theory, have led to widespread suspicion and hostility. Of the multifarious aspects and issues in this area I will focus on the relationship of systematic thinking with the realistic Gospel narratives.

My opening quotation suggested that "in its multiplicity of functions, its characteristic style, its sensuality and indirectness, the novel is wholly different from the philosophical treatise," and Iris Murdoch's novels were seen as "best equipped to incarnate a philosophy which a treatise could not adequately set down." My discussion of the Gospels' middle-distance realism is in line with a similar conclusion, but just as Iris Murdoch continues to write philosophy as well as novels, so theology needs to relate its systematic thinking to the Gospels. Not only their philosophical implications, their multiplicity of functions, and their style can be investigated but also their structure, historicity, sociology, psychology, culture, economics, linguistics, and much else. There can be no fixing in advance the results of such examinations: each must be carried through in all its specialist particularity, and accusations of manipulation, reductionism, or other forms of insensitivity or inappropriateness need to be considered in detailed argument. Likewise, those conclusions which propose fresh understanding or assessment of these stories require the sort of discussion that allows the validity of method, argument, and verdict to be adequately assessed. In short, there is a vast field of intellectual engagement here which has many implications for apologetics. Middle-distance realism too needs to be able to argue for its priority in the form in which I have presented it above in section II, and the thrust of the debate is towards transcending the narrower systematic investigations towards the more comprehensive, especially ontology.

Just as Iris Murdoch supports the relative priority of her novels over her philosophy in rendering what is most important in human life, so I have argued for the primacy of the Gospel story's content and perspective in Christianity. Systematic thinking has many roles in relation to this, but crucial issues will concern the way in which it allows itself to be informed by this story, and how far its system, whether critical or constructive, is appropriate to the story's form and content. There can be no general rules for resolving the complex issues raised here, and there is also in the subject matter something deeply resistant to adequate reformulation in systematic terms—perhaps this

resistance is best conceived as a combination of what Iris Murdoch says about the realistic novel together with the claim of the Gospels to be testimony. This testimony is of course open to examination by all appropriate systematic means, from logic to archaeology, but it is itself the telling of a story about events which are contingent and particular to one time and place, which can never be rerun, and which therefore are unavoidably entrusted to witnesses whose reliability may be assessed but whose place in history and tradition can never be duplicated. In addition, the criteria of reliability for testimony in a middle-distance perspective can, as mentioned above, never be reduced to accuracy of detail or truth of general statements. It might even be that a testimony to Jesus Christ might be true in its identification of him and its verdict on him while yet containing a great deal of what we would call "fictionalized" material.[22]

So far in this section I have been concerned with systematic thinking but not specifically with systematic theology. I take it for granted that systematic theology will take seriously other disciplines and will therefore come to its own task having learnt from them, and open to learning more. My limited focus now is on the relationship of systematic theology to the Gospel story, in line with the position I have already developed. How can systematic theology explore and maintain the truth of what is primarily expressed in a very different genre? The main traditional answer has been: Through concentration on key *loci*, notably God, election, creation, providence, Jesus Christ, salvation, Holy Spirit, church, and eschatology. The main relationship between these *loci* has not been systematic but has been their ordering in an "overarching story." This meant that the overarching story

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[22] I have listened to an expert on Soviet history go through point after point in which Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zürich* is inaccurate historically, partly due to the author's bias and partly due to his ignorance of some sources. The fascinating question was raised: At what point does such accumulation of evidence invalidate the overall portrayal of Lenin and his significance? A further question is: Granted the importance of Lenin and his immense continuing influence, and therefore the inevitability of stories, myths, biographies, and "images" of him, might the only adequate response to Solzhenitsyn be the attempt to do better what he has tried to do? He has offered a story that does grapple with the many levels and dimensions of Lenin and has arrived at verdicts which are self-involving and controversial, and it is this whole "icon" to which response is invited. As regards the Gospels, it seem to me that it is in their aspect of testimony to a whole "icon" of Jesus Christ that they are most defensible, and that most critics become less convincing the more they take up the challenge to construct an alternative icon. But of course the very verdict "defensible" is a signal for yet another stage in the endless inquiry into the Gospels' meaning and truth.

was the mediation between systematic thinking and my present focus, the Gospel story, and this overall narrative framework implied the subordination of the systematic aspect to the narrative.

Yet this subordination accompanied a distinctive development of the systematic that has a parallel in what Stern observed about Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Stern noted the interplay of the story-line of events *nacheinander* with the simultaneity of the *nebeneinander* view. In Christian thought the various *loci* display such simultaneity. Each of them involves, explicitly or implicitly, all the others, thus drawing on all parts of the overarching story. For example, to have a doctrine of creation that is developed without regard for its implications for the doctrines of God, salvation, and so on is to have a theology that is inadequate systematically. It is as if each doctrine only reaches its appropriate richness and thoroughness by being led through a series of dialectical encounters with other doctrines. This journey (the equivalent in systematics of the journey of intensification in the mode of performance) should result in a doctrine that has taken account of all the others but still maintains the modesty of being only one among several such doctrines. In this way any totalitarian systematic overview is avoided and there is enabled a systematic particularity informed and conditioned by the historical particularity of the story—past, present and future.[23] The doctrine which might seem to

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[23]   It is not, of course, necessary to have a traditional understanding of the overarching story in order to practice such *locus*-centered theology. Recent centuries have seen vast changes in how this can be understood, and the competing secular alternatives (notably the ideological developments of the theory of evolution, the belief in "progress," Marxism's dialectical materialist theory of history, and Fascism's master race destined for world domination) have sharpened the debate that had long been carried on between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam concerning the overarching story. Many recent theologies have been especially concerned with a Christian conception of world history (e.g., Teilhard, Rahner, Pannenberg) but such explicit elaboration is not necessary for a theologian to have a view of the "plot" of history that is deeply influential in his work. It would be instructive to examine theologians in a similar way to that applied to historians by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973). My conclusion about Karl Barth in this respect is that his avoidance of a conception of world history other than that offered by the Bible, combined with his reluctance to let the biblical accounts compete with others (most noticeable in his doctrine of creation), lead him to displace the effective content of the overarching story in two directions, first into his doctrine of God, especially of election, and second into Christology, whose key story, subsuming all others typologically, is that of the Gospel. Since his doctrine of election also pivots around the Gospel, Barth in effect uses the story of Jesus Christ as his overarching story, relating all else in history to that. Not surprisingly this has led to various criticisms. Of these the most powerful offer alternative

have most frequently tried to dominate the others and so escape this essential pluralism is that of the Trinity, but it could be argued that the Trinity represents within itself the irreducible pluralism and anti-totalitarianism of the best Christian thinking, with one of its "persons" after another being emphasized in order to reassert both their distinctiveness and their coinherence in the face of positions that threaten these. Various other doctrines have had their period of hegemony, but the ecology of the system as a whole has tended to qualify and correct this situation.

What are the ontological implications if the best way to understand Christian truth is, as suggested, that it is witnessed to primarily by narrative that informs worship, community, and prophetic speech and action, and that it is capable of endless exploration, most appropriately through distinct yet coinherent *loci*? The very limitation of the scope of certain modes of systematizing by the particularity, contingency, and freedom in Christian faith is itself a major statement about the nature of reality and has long been a focus of reflection and theorizing. This is closely linked to the prominence of "performance" and ultimately concerns the nature of God. The nature of time is also raised acutely by this position, as it is for Stern by *The Magic Mountain.* Much narrative theology suffers from an unexamined notion of time, often playing up its linearity at the expense of its density and of the coinherence of times through memory, causality, anticipation or faith in God, and very rarely, as Stern does, exploring its relativity. This is an avenue which could lead to more understanding between currently opposed positions, and in particular to a recognition of the complementarity of narrative and locus-centered approaches. This also leads to the basic issue of God and his time. A related fundamental aspect of reality suggested by Stern's critique of Mann and also relevant to the Bible, and especially to the understanding of God, is that of the absolute: How can Stern talk of "fictionally achieved absolutes" as the equivalent of the constant speed of light in Einstein's

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ways of handling the problem that can claim to do more justice to creation and science, critical history, the contingency and openness of the future, and the reality of evil. It is as if Barth, for all his sensitivity to the literary realism of the Gospel story, was led at times to use it theologically in the interests of an overall doctrinal position in a way that violates its integrity as a realistic story. Cf. Chaps. 5, 6, 8, and 10 in Ford, *Barth and God's Story.*

relativity theory? How can a conception of the absolute, or of ultimate constancy, be discerned through biblical narrative and other genres?

One could go on raising in turn all the main matters of ontology and of epistemology within the suggested conception of theology, but, as with the category of performance, the formality of such issue-raising underlines the need to *do* ontology, epistemology, and systematic theology. I have tried to make the method of Christian theology inseparable from its content, and so the formal principles cannot claim to be neutral *vis-à-vis* any particular theology. There are definite conceptions of God, creation, Jesus Christ, and all the other doctrines implicit in this approach or yet to be discovered through it, and these in turn may lead to considerable revision of the approach. Some of the doctrinal positions will be found in *Praising and Knowing God,* but the main challenge remains the direct handling of the *loci.*

V. Lindbeck's Theory of Religion

George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory of religion is, as suggested above, in many ways congenial to the line I have taken. He sees religion as

> a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium which shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a Kantian *a priori,* although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills which could be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), nor a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom which makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon which shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a language (or "language game" to use Wittgenstein's phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral

> dimensions, so also in the case of a religious tradition. Its
> doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are
> integrally related to the rituals it practises, the sentiments or
> experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the
> institutional forms it develops.[24]

As he develops his thesis there are several implications which are es-
pecially relevant to my position. Firstly, there is the way in which his
theory makes primary what I have called a middle-distance realism.
He does this partly by his criticism of two alternative theories: the
"experiential-expressive," which pivots its understanding of religion
around religious interiority and sees the main direction of formative
influence being from inner to outer; and the "cognitive-propositional,"
which sees religion as primarily a cognitive system of propositions in a
relationship of correspondence or non-correspondence with reality.
He does it positively by claiming that the best way to do justice to the
rich particularity of a religion is to engage in "thick description" of
the actual behavior, communication, and other exchanges that hap-
pen, and in this way to elucidate "the informal logic of actual life."[25]
In this way he offers a theory that serves the primacy of the middle-
distance perspective, while yet allowing major roles to other types of
theory and other disciplines, as well as the fruitfulness of interiorized
religion.

     In theology Lindbeck recommends a regulative theory of doc-
trine in which doctrines are not primarily truth claims or expressive
symbols but are "communally authoritative rules of discourse, atti-
tude and action."[26] They are statements of the basic grammar of a
religion. This is a narrow definition of doctrine that (like Lonergan's)
distinguishes it from systematic theology and particular ways of un-
derstanding and developing doctrine in dogmatics. It does not, there-
fore, rule out cognitive-propositional enterprises or the attempt to do
locus-centered theology. Rather, it encourages the latter because of
its dedication to working through the particularity of a religion, and
over against this sort of systematics it plays down the importance both
of foundational theology, which proposes a framework transcending
such particularity, and of apologetics, which tends, on the linguistic

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[24]	*Nature of Doctrine,* 33.
[25]	Ibid., 115.
[26]	Ibid., 18.

analogy, to translate into other idioms the "language" of a particular religion rather than trying to teach that language itself.

Lindbeck's stress on categorial adequacy and on the enormous importance of the problem of the incommensurability of the primary categories used in various religions and theologies is a more general version of what I have attempted to do within Christianity using the categories of system, story and performance. He too gives a special primacy to narrative and to literary consideration of it,[27] he even says that "the text . . . absorbs the world rather than the world the text,"[28] and he constantly stresses the intrinsic importance of performance in arriving at conclusions about a religion's identity and truth. The result is an "ecological" view of the meaning and truth of a religion that can take account of the dynamic interaction of system, story, and performance:

> As actually lived, a religion may be pictured as a single gigan-tic proposition. It is a true proposition to the extent that its objectivities are interiorized and exercised by groups and in-dividuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness which lies at the heart of things. It is a false proposition to the extent that this does not happen. . . . A religious utterance, one might say, acquires the propo-sitional truth of ontological correspondence only in so far as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that correspondence.[29]

This paper has not been concerned to propose a theory of religion, but my conclusions prompt some questions about Lindbeck's theory as well as a great deal of agreement with it. Is his preference for a social-anthropological method of "thick description" not essentially biased towards Christianity, with its primacy of the middle-distance perspective? Can his suspicion of foundational theories and neutral frameworks not be applied to his own cultural-linguistic theory? Lind-beck might well be willing to grant this, but the consequences of

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[27]   Ibid., e.g., Chap. 2, Chap. 6.
[28]   Ibid., 118.
[29]   Ibid., 51, 65. Praise, for example, has this logic of performance, creativity, and correspondence, and so has the telling of testimony.

doing so might extend to changing the way his position can be properly conceived. For example, his somewhat Kantian preference for "rules" and "categories" might need to be corrected in the direction of a more thorough integration of rules, categories, and content. Further, his bias towards the practical in his conception of truth in religion may be one legitimate "journey of intensification" but needs to be able to do more justice to others.[30] These points may be illustrated by examining his position from two angles, one oriented more to the systematic, the other to performance.

In his sensitive discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, Lindbeck makes a strong case for seeing it as regulative, but his comments make too great a distinction between seeing it as rule and seeing it as ontological proposition. He says about the conflict between Eastern and Western Christian understanding of the economic and immanent trinities that the issue of their ontological truth is

> irrelevant to theological assessment. Which theory is theologically best depends on how well it organizes the data of scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life. In terms of these specifically theological criteria, there may be good or bad theories on both sides of the ontological dispute regarding the economic and immanent aspects of the Trinity. The question of the ontological reference of the theories may often be unimportant for theological evaluation.[31]

The one-sidedness of this lies in its suggested downgrading of the knowledge content in Christian worship and life, and the displacement of the ontological truth question into a practical question as to "how well it organizes the data of scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life." This bias is reinforced throughout Lindbeck's work by his insistence that theology is a reflective, second-order activity.[32] This, in line with the linguistic analogy of

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[30] Cf. the discussion of various modern theologies in *Praising and Knowing God,* 196–209, and the criticism of some who "excessively devalue knowledge as such" (204).

[31] *Nature of Doctrine,* 106.

[32] Lindbeck understandably mentions Thomas Kühn's philosophy of science, but that theory's preference for a "softer" conception of knowledge in natural science, thus bringing it nearer to social-scientific theories, is by no means undisputed, and

the second-order status of grammar, plays down its capacity to reach and affirm first-order truth. But this is an analogy that is bound to be inadequate for conceptions of theology that see their task, for example, more in terms of the theories of natural science or the integration of theology and aesthetics.[33]

Uneasiness about the excessive practicality of Lindbeck's conception of knowledge and truth might focus on his final chapter's recommendation of an "intratextuality" in systematics in which the text absorbs the world rather than *vice versa*. My own approach would lead to a qualified version of this, but the qualifications would amend Lindbeck's position at the points already mentioned. They would lead, through a recognition of rules and of the creative, demanding nature of redescription of the world in Christian terms, to a higher conception of the *locus* in theology as an affirmation that is in a dynamic relationship of truth with its object.[34]

The second illustration tries to focus a doubt about whether Lindbeck's use of the cultural-linguistic parallel tends towards a conservative bias. It is perhaps inevitable and right that a Christian theologian in the mainstream should favor a "hermeneutic of retrieval" over a "hermeneutic of suspicion," but yet at the heart of the Christian story is an event of radical condemnation and discontinuity, the crucifixion of Jesus. How does one "retrieve" such an event? The retrieval by identification with it in baptism signifies the "death" of the one who is baptized. In other words, this is a "language" whose learning involves the "death" of the learning self. In the face of the cross and the reality of its appropriation in baptism is there not implicit a critique of the continuities of meaning represented by the cultural-linguistic theory of religion? It is always possible, of course, to step outside and regard

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T. F. Torrance, for example, has a theology with a very different conception of science and a theological "knowledge" that is by no means reflective or second-order. Lindbeck would perhaps say that Torrance is excessively "cognitive-propositional," but in fact much of his work is in line with Lindbeck's regulative approach; he differs in relating the regulative and the ontological theoretically rather than practically. Both might be legitimate, but Lindbeck does not allow sufficient scope for Torrance.

[33] Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics. Vol. I: Seeing the Form* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1982).

[34] As suggested in *Praising and Knowing God,* Chaps. 7 and 8, Appendices A and B. A good test case of the limitations of the conception of "text absorbing world" is the stories of creation. Barth, for example, attempted to let the Genesis stories inform his doctrine of creation in a way that appears unreceptive to scientific and historical knowledge.

baptism as the internalizing of the message of the Gospel through word and act, but Lindbeck is committed to going the whole way in "thick description" from the inside, and this makes the issue of death, in all its Christian and ontological dimensions,[35] inescapable. There is here a radical relativizing of the cultural-linguistic theory from within the particular content of Christianity, even though admittedly the theory fares far better than the main rivals discussed by Lindbeck.

How can the cultural-linguistic approach, thus relativized by, for example, science and the death of Jesus, be taken up into something beyond itself? On the systematic level Lindbeck envisages, as mentioned above, the whole of a religion in more or less correspondence with God. I have criticized him for transcending the relativistic limitations of the cultural-linguistic approach in one-sidedly practical terms. A correction of this would involve a *locus*-oriented theology involving the coinherence of system, story, and performance. But death is the end of all interiorizing and externalizing of language and behavior. When it is further specified as the death of Jesus who rose again from the dead perhaps one has a non-fictional equivalent of the "fictionally achieved absolutes" discovered by Stern in *The Magic Mountain*. Stern's parallel is with the role of the speed of light as an absolute constant in relativity theory. In Christian theology the resurrection of Jesus has a similar role. It informs and transforms all systematic conceptions of ontology, of God, and of other doctrines; it establishes and illuminates the primacy of the story witnessing to Jesus; and it liberates an explosion of new worship, community-building, and prophetic speech and action.

VI. Conclusion

This paper's conception of good Christian systematic theology is, therefore, that it aims at the truth of the various *loci* while taking account, in ways appropriate to their content, of narrative, systems, and performance. The "best apologetics" happens in the course of carrying through this enterprise, as the rigorous pursuit of truth becomes reciprocal with faithful living in a community that worships together and is summoned to service and to sharing its life and truth (including its questions) with others. The apologetics may, as Lindbeck suggests, be *ad hoc*. But that neuter *hoc* hardly does justice to the men and

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[35]   Including the radical problem of sin, not least in theology.

women with whom apologetics is concerned. Christian apologetics is, therefore, also *ad hos* and *ad has*, and in the course of this exchange inevitably becomes involved with its interlocutors' systems and stories, and so justifiably elicits, often in highly specialist forms, the best energies of Christian theologians and others.

I conclude, as I began, with a quotation from within that British tradition of philosophy whose reserve with regard both to systems and to undue concern with the interior of the self may not be unconnected with a cultural formation in which Shakespeare, George Eliot, and their twentieth-century successors such as Iris Murdoch play a central role:

> What is said by *King Lear* and *War and Peace* is said through the individuality and particularity of the characters, situations and conversations of which the works consist. Above all it is expressed in different *language* from any that can be used in a short summary or in any paraphrase, and differences of language amount to differences of *meaning*—that is to say, to differences of content. . . . These points taken together indicate a degree of overlapping in scope and function between literature and religion that sets in a new light the idea of the Bible "designed to be read as literature". . . . When we think about life and conduct, just as when we think about knowledge and its grounds, we must engage in that explanation of the similarities and differences between particulars and particulars on which even the more formal and systematic modes of thought are in the end dependent. In Ezra Pound's words, 'Art does not avoid universals, it strikes at them all the harder in that it strikes through particulars' (*Literary Essays*, p. 440). The literary power of accurate and precise portrayal of complexity, individuality, and particularity, is as much as any human power a power of human thought. Literature is one of the functions of the human reason.[36]

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[36] R. Bambrough, *Reason, Truth and God* (London: Methuen, 1969), 121, 122, 123.