

Reflections on Theological Reconstruction

BY WALTER H. CAPPS

I RESPONDED enthusiastically to the request to write an article on theological reconstruction when it came from the editors of this journal, knowing that I would be forced thereby to correlate some of the notions I have on the subject. However, when it came time to put pen to paper, I found it impossible to treat this subject in the usual journal/article manner. I trust that my inability to do so is not just inability to do so, but, instead, the result of a deep-seated conviction that insights accrue only to an accurate correspondence between subject matter and method of approach. Were I attempting nothing other than a historical examination and/or logical analysis of some aspect of the subject, I could have proceeded in the typical manner. But I understood the editors to be hoping for more than that. For my part, too, I wanted to offer not only comments on the subject, but contributions to its form. As I worked with the topic, I became more and more convinced that significant advances on the subject must come in the form of clarity regarding the place and function of theological models of reflection. *Critical theological modal self-consciousness* might be the best way of defining the achievement that would put the subject into sharpest view. Though I doubt that such a project can be set to program, I wish it might be advanced, if only a little, through suggestive vantage points which have been placed in constellation. This I have attempted to do in the concatenation of reflections and impressions which follows. If anyone wonders, my attitude to theological reconstruction is that, under fitting circumstances, I favor it.

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In preparing a history of the phenomenological movement, the late French thinker, Pierre Thevenaz, stated that the "truly profound revolutions in philosophy proceed more from innovations of method than from metaphysical illuminations."¹ The insight is valuable and prompts further attention, particularly in its positive aspect: revolutions in thought proceed

1 Pierre Thevenaz, *What is Phenomenology?* translated by James M. Edie, Charles Courtney, Paul Brockelman (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 38.

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from innovations of method. A genetic account of innovation and novelty in thought should give stress to the mastering and poising of skills and techniques. Revolutions occur through the work of resourceful craftsmen. They come about through the cultivation of new arts and crafts and the application of tested proficiencies to subjects and materials which had not been approached that way before. Thevenaz needed the contrast in order to emphasize his point, but that side of his statement is not quite accurate. The word "metaphysical" is misleading. Thevenaz is talking more about ideology, worldview, the content of thought than about metaphysics strictly defined. But the point is drawn forcefully: reconstruction in theology, too, occurs through discovery and elaboration of new and gifted methodological skills. Then those skills refer fresh insights to materials which were always there, though, perhaps not always recognized. Innovation is freshness, and freshness is sometimes found in intelligence shifted from other fields. As Corita said, the surest way to become creative, inventive, and original is to master the methods used by someone else.

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Michael Novak, following Bernard Lonergan, in company with Emerich Coreth, Carlos Cirne-Lima, and a group of others who maintain Augustine-and-Thomas allegiances, refers frequently to "horizon" and argues for its priority both in life and in thought.² By "horizon"—in life and in thought—Novak sometimes means "the condition of the possibility of asking questions." Thomas Kuhn calls it "paradigm" when tracing the genesis of scientific revolutions,³ and Karl Popper uses the same term with added suggestiveness.⁴ Both Popper and Kuhn contend that scientific discovery presumes the cultivation of "paradigms." For them, the word "paradigm" denotes the acquisition of certain gifted, resourceful, and consistent intellectual habits. Cardinal Newman liked the phrase "habit of mind."⁵ Such habits maintain priority within patterns of discovery. In Margaret Master-

2 Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief. A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965); Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysik: Eine methodisch-systematische Grundlegung* (Innsbruck, 1961); Carlos Cirne-Lima, *Personal Faith: A Metaphysical Inquiry*, trans. G. Richard Dimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965); Bernard Lonergan, "Metaphysics as Horizon," in *Gregorianum* 44 (1963), pp. 307-318—this article also appeared in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, edited by F. E. Crowe (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), pp. 202-220.

3 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

4 Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

5 John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1959), p. 129.

man's reading, "paradigm" means a "way of seeing."⁶ To embellish this, translated into the language of spatial arrangement, one can cite Erik H. Erikson's fuller claim, "life is fore-seeing." In every case, horizons, paradigms, and ways of (fore-)seeing own sequential priority in paths of discovery and tracings of insights. Discovery follows upon the habitual formation of insight. Thus intellectual history must consist of a succession of paradigmatic styles: large comprehensive designs, paradigmatic arrangements. Reconstructions in theology have followed paradigmatic shifts, adjustments, and new designs. Novak's "horizons" registers here and may fortify Thevenaz' "innovations of method." (Footnote: Robert M. Hutchins thinks legal codes precede social behavior.)

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Giotto and Raphael are the alpha and omega of the distinct and comprehensive Renaissance model in art. So suggests E. H. Gombrich, who is also disposed to account for the occurrence of select cultural styles by detecting the advent of specific, identifiable techniques. Between these two Renaissance craftsmen, particularly in Florence, a deliberate, repeatable, artistic model came into being, then gained force and momentum in painting, architecture, and sculpture. After it had taken on a host of kindred adumbrations, it gradually played itself out, or into something else. Corregio's subsequent elaboration of Raphael consisted more of an introduction of new trends than of elucidation and commentary on an archetype. Corregio's work signalled that the style had been articulated, its variations had been drawn out, and its resources had become exhausted. The initial freshness had been supplanted by the repetition of tried and tested forms. Since repetition gets tiresome, styles can be eclipsed. Thus, Renaissance was succeeded by Baroque and Rococo, just as Renaissance had been preceded by Gothic and Romanesque. But the cycle is multi-layered and moves in several directions. Renaissance reappears in neo-Renaissance just as themes from classical Greece and Rome had reappeared in Renaissance. Similarly Gothic reappears as neo-Gothic, sometimes influenced by neo-Renaissance. (Gombrich notes that civilization is a delicate plant.)

The same processes occur within the history of reflection. Entire eras serve a single paradigm, or, alternatively, are involved in the creation of an intellectual style. The paradigm comes into being, functions for its time or until its resources are exhausted or eclipsed, then seems to give

6 Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 59-89.

way to a successor paradigm. Patristic theology, pre-Augustinianism, Augustinianism, pre-Scholasticism, Scholasticism, Augustinian-Scholasticism, Augustinian-anti-Scholasticism, pre-Reformation theology, Reformation-anti-Scholasticism, post-Reformation-new-Scholasticism, on and on, backward and forward, horizontal and cyclical. The *elan* moves on. Take Scholasticism. It lies implicit in Boethius. But Boethius, too early, needs baptism. Then comes a deliberate phrasing of questions, the development of logic in the mediaeval cathedral schools. Anselm. Abelard. Peter Lombard. Albertus Magnus. It comes into being, gradually then more and more, becomes full-blown after Aristotle is discovered in the West. Then, when certain internal inconsistencies are enlarged upon, its powers are diminished, its attractiveness cut short, and its agency eclipsed. Eventually, in some places, it gives way to a successor paradigm, which, characteristically, inspires a new era. Ironically, the chief elaborators of the paradigm are most responsible for its undoing. St. Thomas Aquinas supplied the model with the stuff and the dynamic that overtaxed it. Duns Scotus disclosed the scheme's vulnerability, then, in seeking to provide buffer, simply accelerated its collapse. Then, dead set against crumbling, Scholasticism became more stubbornly entrenched, partly by recourse to the offices of negative conscience. Later, some Protestants, who had thought that Scholasticism was their chief intellectual enemy, found it wise to become "Scholastic" again. Distinct styles play themselves in, play themselves out, play themselves back, then bounce back and forth. But is it play? Theology is different from art, Barbara Ward says, in that styles are approached as objects of loyalty and not simply as matters of taste.

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Theological reconstruction is of two sorts. It is either the internal kind which recommends variations on a paradigm that maintain a paradigm, or it is the epochal kind that finds one comprehensive paradigm giving way to another comprehensive paradigm. The former usually produces new chairs and new schools. The latter stimulates new intellectual economies and new cultural eras, but only with strong wind and sore pain.

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The recent era in theological history, from the Enlightenment to the present, has been formed by the capacities of a single paradigm or model of reflection. The paradigm was regulated by definite interests and motivated by prescribed ends. It was designed to give place to religion outside the sanctioned enclosures of revelation-and-tradition, or to certify religion-as-refined/natural-human-experience. Then it groped for techniques to lure religion-as-Christianity back but on refined/natural grounds. Immanuel

Kant, combining Locke and Descartes, was its principal architect. Friedrich Schleiermacher, successor to Kant, worked out the most crucial variations on the original theme. Later, Ernst Cassirer sought structural extensions and expansions that Kant would not have condoned. Anders Nygren detected creative possibilities that both Kant and Schleiermacher had overlooked. Albrecht Ritschl saw some others, and Ernst Troeltsch moved Ritschl more fully into Neo-Kantian worlds. The same model was operative for Rudolf Otto, no matter how much he sought to transcend it. Tillich's work too belongs to the same chapter. Karl Barth acknowledged the same when he wrote "Immanuel Kant stands by himself . . . a stumbling-block and rock of offence in the new age, someone determinedly pursuing his own course, more feared than loved, a prophet whom almost everyone even among those who wanted to go forward with him had first to re-interpret before they could do anything with him."⁷ Similar to the Renaissance style, the paradigm constitutes a self-contained chapter whose final paragraphs have not been written. There have been challenges, of course, but Kant hasn't found it necessary yet to turn in his grave. His work was well done, stylistically sound, paradigmatically resourceful, but, alas, not immortal.

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Aristotle asked "what sorts of things are there?" St. Thomas Aquinas said why the sorts of things that are are assorted as they are. Immanuel Kant slipped how between Aristotle's what and St. Thomas' why.

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We know much about ways in which paradigms serve systematic reflection. We also know something about ways in which the substance of religion is transmitted from place to place, culture to culture, and era to era, by means of paradigmatic aids. We know something too about transformations of paradigms, about ways in which paradigms are stimulated toward innovation, and about invitations to other paradigms to perform services of which alternative paradigms are incapable. We can talk about the nature and function of paradigms. We know how they work. And yet we lack understanding of the conditions which make one paradigm more suitable than another. In addition, we have very insignificant predictive ability regarding the time and place in which a selected paradigm might propose itself. Though we know how paradigms work, we cannot translate this knowledge into the future tense so as to be able to effect paradigmatic transformations or lend them design. With all of our analytical finesse, we seem to be victims of historical and theoretical acci-

⁷ Karl Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p. 150.

dent. One paradigm seems to succeed another without feeling obligated to wait until we have had a chance to vote them into being.

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Carl Braaten helps, though, when he discloses the story of *Dialog* in the tenth-anniversary issue of that journal.⁸ The entire issue can be read as a good example of collective autobiography. Fortunately, most of the original editors of the journal were still at work at the end of the ten-year period. Consequently, they were able to review the trials of the journal from a shared perspective. The journal came into being, Braaten writes, "one day [when] Bob Jenson and I were having lunch at the Harrisville's in St. Paul." From those beginnings, Braaten launches the chronicle that records the journal's interaction with dominant theological mood swings in the period between 1962 and 1972. Secularization of religion is given due place; the "Death of God theology" is mentioned more than once; Vatican II is properly acknowledged; the Vietnam War is cited as a significant catalyst; then there is reference to Bultmann and post-Bultmannian concerns, and a prolongation of the tiresome quest for the historical Jesus. The chronicle ends with eschatology and with oblique references to the wide ranges of inspiration still latent in the new theology of hope.

"We argued our heads off," Braaten recalls. "Harrisville was on his way from *Heilsgeschichte* theology to the exciting new world of Bultmann and existentialist interpretation. I recall Jenson and I were pushing him to speed it up. . . ." Thus, the position with which they began and the position to which they came can be identified as a fluid but more-or-less shared perspective of a ten-year span. The editors of the journal found association in shared work. *Dialog* was the means by which its story was written. The ten years of the journal's life were given to the fashioning of a theological paradigm. In that time they allowed the paradigm to play itself out and/or play itself into something else. It was a paradigm within a paradigm, something special, something personal, corporately personal. "All these new theological interests were drawn into our lives as young Christian scholars in the tradition of Norwegian-American Lutheranism, centered mostly in the Midwest. So while Harrisville, Jenson and I had lots to argue about, we had come out of the same American experience, the same church, even the same theological seminary. And we were encountering new theologies at the same time. We decided to found a journal, not out of any great sense of mission or destiny, but to have a tool and

8 Carl E. Braaten, "The Colliding of Eschatology and Establishment," in *Dialog*. Vol. XI (Winter, 1972), pp. 18-22.

toy of our own." A tool and a toy, something to play with, to play itself out, or to play itself into something else. Both the paradigm and the medium were rooted in the very particular experiences—does anyone have general experiences?—of Braaten, Harrisville, Jenson, and, maybe, Harrisville's wife who probably fixed lunch.

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George Steiner says that "wherever literary structure strives towards new potentialities," writers reach out "to one of the other grammars of human perception—art, music, and more recently, mathematics."⁹ Stylistic transformations do indeed occur because of the resilience of literary and symbolic forms. Form can be transmitted from poetry to philosophy, music to mathematics, and back again, and between images and thoughts, visions and reflections. In this way, Vincent van Gogh changed the shapes of trees. Søren Kierkegaard showed his sensitivity to the architecture of literary form when he changed the conventions of philosophical arguments. Ludwig Wittgenstein's revolution in philosophy can be attributed to the same capacities. Also, Ernst Bloch thinks in pictures. Reconstruction of thought has to do with alterations in patterns of thinking and substitutions of topics. Such alterations can be inspired from within or become accessible when disciplines borrow languages and modes of operating from other disciplines. New languages are created through devotion to other grammars. Reconstruction occurs through innovation in form, style, design, horizon, intellectual habit formation, ways of (fore-)seeing, and paradigmatic tinkering. So, Jack be nimble, Jack be quick.

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When one surveys the history of Christian theology, he can detect the presence and operation of large, comprehensive paradigms or models of reflection. Every student of the history of Christian theology is familiar with the thesis that an Aristotelian mode of thought is implicit in the systematic theological outlook of St. Thomas Aquinas. This is standard historical interpretation, and scholars in the field go on to argue about the extent to which Neoplatonic strains are also present in Thomas' writings. The same kind of approach works well too when one comes to interpret the theological writings of St. Augustine. George Lindbeck's comment on Augustine's attitude, "The Platonists knew the goal, but not the way" gives indication of St. Augustine's dependence upon a revised classical philosophical thought model. One can go on from there to argue that many

9 George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, "The Pythagorean Genre. A Conjecture in Honor of Ernst Bloch" (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 112.

of the crucial distinctions between St. Augustine's and St. Thomas' theologies refer back to crucial distinctions between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. In many formal respects, the theologians merely perpetuated the attitudes of their respective philosophical predecessors, occasionally with only partial awareness that they were doing so.

But there are other instances of paradigmatic dependence whose roots are more difficult to trace. It may well be the case, for example, that classical Stoicism is implicit in the theological orientation of John Calvin. Similarly, one can argue that an atomistic (Epicurean) conceptual structure—revised through nominalistic intervention—is operative, at least partially, in Martin Luther's theological outlook. It follows that many of the prime points of difference and emphasis between the two Reformers can be referred to the respective formal patterns of reflection which they employed. Calvin's emphasis upon predestination vs. Luther's emphasis on grace alone is a significant instance.

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But when one surveys the entire sweep of Christian theological history, he discovers not only times when models of reflection were operating with obvious prominence but also times of apparent paradigmatic chaos. The history of Christian thought isn't exhausted by examples of "isms" functioning forcefully. There are also many times in which previous paradigms have lost their power and fall into decay and disuse. There are sometimes large spaces between styles, periods of time when no style is particularly prominent, and extensive borderlands between eras. These are times when Christians are on the verge of styles still unsettled or are attempting to attain full release from styles too settled. Some are repulsed by such times. Others express fear of such times. Still others welcome such times, "hugging their traumas like hallelujahs." Perhaps now is this time, not the time for new theological system building but a time to rejoice that decomposition is making things clearer. This must be Joseph Sittler's "dialectic of debacle, with its own fecundity."¹⁰

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Jürgen Moltmann is an intelligent, able, and conscientious theologian, one of the best among contemporary examples. He continues listening to Barth and Bonhoeffer while talking friendly with Marxists, lunching avidly with Ernst Bloch, and preaching vigorously on Sundays. However, his

¹⁰ Joseph Sittler, "The Theological Situation: The Achievement of Values in Architecture," in *Revolution, Place and Symbol*. Journal of the First International Congress on Religion, Architecture and the Visual Arts (New York: 1969), pp. 16-33.

genius lies not in such capacities for creative syntheses, but in his forcefulness in making the future tense the theological norm.¹¹

One accounts for this superficially by calling it something else. Sure, it is a fine version of resacralized secular theology. It is obviously an opportune extension of Kasemann's and van Rad's interpretations of the Bible. And, it is out of Tübingen this time that massive social problems are approached with consonant theological depth. But, further down, it is a matter of grammar, language, and transformational-paradigmatic achievement. The eloquent regulative capacities discovered under the sovereignty of the future tense lends luster, resilience, and paradigmatic vigor to Moltmann's conceptual outlook. Once this has been established, Moltmann, like a skillful conceptual architect, can proceed to rearrange the contents of the Christian faith. Once the content of Christian faith is fitted to horizontal extension and linear projection, content is not what content was. Concentration falls on time's destiny and mankind's ultimate objective. Theology functions to consecrate that destiny, sanction those objectives, and bring refinement to both. One can understand the buoyancy that follows: the openness of the future creates an occasion for a *novum* both in thought and in life. Dreams and visions can be played with and can be taken seriously, both simultaneously and synonymously. Adventure, novelty, spontaneity, and creativity can be sustained because what is normative is also not closed. The *novum* comes on like new air and affluent waters. So good is it that if unshackled from some remaining vestiges of repression, Moltmann's theology may serve as the paradigmatic equivalent of Petrarch's mountaintop exhilaration, "My God, what a world I see dawning!" Although, in the language of the new age, the theologian might prefer to say, "Oh world, what a God I see dawning!"

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The paradigm of the future will be one that is aware of the paradigm of the future.

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When a new paradigm is born, it functions not only to give shape to contentions its designers deem to be of current significance. It also extends its powers in other directions, and, in so doing, provides historical interpretation with alternative meaning schema. When a new paradigm is born, new things are viewed in new ways, old things are viewed in new ways, new things are viewed in old ways, and new things, old things, new ways, and old ways are discovered. Case in point: the historical spin-offs

¹¹ These matters are gone into more thoroughly in my book, *Time Invades the Cathedral* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

of the current theological interest in apocalyptic. Was religious consciousness aware before that "the Bible is read differently in the underground"?¹² Did it know that astrological interests make even the date of Luther's birth uncertain? For what other than apocalyptic reasons would Luther be challenged to identify the anti-Christ? Recall that on the same question, Savonarola had refused to commit himself, reluctant to fan further the fires of apocalyptic expectancy. But not Luther. Hence, the iconoclastic response, the heightening and disappointment of apocalyptic hopes, and Luther's attempted negotiation of religious enthusiasms. Even for the Reformation an apocalyptic mode of thought was prominent and probably formative.¹³ It had always been that way, but now we have a paradigm to help us see it.

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When theological reconstruction occurs for our time, it will be grounded in psychological understanding and will be cognizant of the insights of eastern religions. Different from former positions in this respect, it will not find Christian things hidden or implicit everywhere nor will it contend on behalf of red-threadism. Further, the new paradigm will insist that the alternative to faith is not just lack of faith but variantly rooted cultural experience. Formerly, when the antagonist was seen as the negation of the positive—the unfaithful vs. the faithful, the irreligious vs. the religious, the impious vs. the pious, the irresolute vs. the resolute, the uncommitted vs. the committed—theological paradigms were allowed to identify exemplary religion with super-sensitive conscience. Frequently the price of this achievement was the sacrifice of rationality to conscience and a distrust of emotions. The counter culture, sensing the failures and exploitations of both old and new, seeks remedy in depth explorations of subconsciousness. But the onrush of eastern religious enthusiasm and dis-enthusiasms will see to it that the new paradigm gives due place to super-ego, ego, and id, all three. Only then can attractive models of personality formation articulate with persuasive models of intellectual formation, as it was in former times.

12 Ernst Bloch, author of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, has given stress to this observation.

13 I am thinking particularly of the research on this subject that has been initiated at the Warburg Institute in London ever since the time that Aby Warburg, the founder of the Institute, addressed this subject in his "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten," in *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 26 (1920), pp. 1-113 (reprinted in Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 487 ff. Leipzig: Teubner, 1932). Some day I hope to return to this topic, to comment upon the materials I have assembled on the subject from the writings of Savonarola, Melancthon, Calvin, Servetus, and others.

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