Introduction

This inquiry's twin concerns are the nature of theology and the nature of reality, where the issue that links them both is the role of language – not the content of language as in theological language, although that is part of it; rather, language as an entity in itself. The scope of the inquiry is the combined context of contemporary realist, postliberal and liberal revisionist theology. It straddles all these schools to a greater or lesser extent in that it arises out of the awareness that, while their various preoccupations and insights are different and potentially complementary, their shortcomings are essentially similar.

The nature of theology

Contemporary theological realists (such as T. F. Torrance) tend to operate with what might be termed a linguistic-window-on-reality model, however much the view from that window is acknowledged to be partial, theory-laden and in need of progressive revisions.[1] While this window on reality is clouded by the limitations and distortions of human concepts, it becomes clearer if not transparent in the search for the truth as the truth gives itself to us to be known. Theological realists accordingly regard theology as having a scientific character in that, like scientific observation and theory-building, it is governed by its object. The being of God reflected in contingent creaturely being has an intrinsic rationality which the human knower comes to know in the same way that he or she comes to know worldly reality – that is, by 'grasping it in its depths' through participating in the given (revealed) structures of its

[1]. See, for instance, T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

being.[2] This approach, therefore, asserts a universal rationality which is in the first place divine and in the second place, contingently, cosmic or worldly. The argument is that our concepts become true concepts as they come to be coordinated with the rational structure of reality (whether divine or worldly) through our indwelling of that reality.

Liberal revisionists (such as Werner Jeanrond) operate with what might be described as a multifaceted one-way mirror model in which a general anthropology mediates divine transcendence through a myriad of human images.[3] The resulting ambiguity requires that religious beliefs, while all assumed to be pointing to the one truth, must be treated as fallible and held tentatively. Human thinking and experience must be tested according to reason, just as, reciprocally, reason must answer to a linguistically mediated experience, for our knowledge of God is not confined to the overtly religious but is present in all truth. A corollary is that theology should always interrelate the experience and rationality of its own time and place with the Christian past in a dialectic that allows each to make a reciprocal contribution to the formulation of Christian claims. Of course, this then poses the dilemma of how to balance this dialectic so that both are taken seriously and entered into fully. The suggestion is that stories common to humanity and Christian text should both be taken as primary sources, each acting reciprocally as critic for the other, each essentially as a story read by the other, where, however, the foundational Jesus story is the 'classic' that is able to transform human existence.

For postliberal theologians (such as George Lindbeck) Christian traditions are in effect mirrors which reflect God holistically *to the extent that* their faithfulness to handed-down and doctrinally ruled uses of the normative text corresponds to the being and will of God.[4] According to the postliberal cultural-linguistic model, 'religions are systems containing both discursive and non-discursive idioms connecting intentionalities with action; they also provide regulative structures which guide reflection, feeling and conduct'.[5] On this view, our humanness is

2. Ibid., pp. 16–17; also T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) p. 90, and *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982) pp. 26–7.
3. See, for instance, W. G. Jeanrond, *Textual Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).
4. Postliberal theology's central architect has been George Lindbeck, lately of Yale; see G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).
5. K Surin, *The Turnings of Darkness and Light: Essays in Philosophical and Systematic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 160.

acquired and shaped in a particular communal reality. As this particular reality or world is primary, and accordingly any purportedly generic view must rest on the axioms grounding the viewer's standpoint, there can be no non-linguistic or universal experience. All human experience comes historically and contextually shaped, in this case Christ-shaped. In this regard, Scripture is taken as encompassing 'both the times and stories of the text and those of the reader', who 'must fit his or her own experience into Scripture's cumulative narrative, thus becoming a "figure" of the text. Christian reality claims (mediation) and the formation of the Christian life (application) follow from and are normed by the explicative shape of biblical narrative.'[6]

A key difference between these perspectives is their view of truth which reflects their understanding of the role of language. Realist theology asserts that Christian truth claims only make sense if they correspond to an extra-linguistic reality beyond inherited traditions of belief and practice and the claims of human religious experience. Being true to Christianity's incarnational revelation of God in Jesus Christ means taking its associated truth claims as absolute. On the other hand, postliberal theology views truth in terms of faithfulness to the norm of Scripture as interpreted by a tradition. In both cases truth may be a matter of revelation and reality a matter of givenness, but according to very different models. The pragmatically based postliberal view of truth seems to be restricted to received truth expressed in traditional patterns and as such it would appear unable to explain the dynamic and innovative character of a Christianity that is always renewing itself in new and surprising ways. In this regard, the theological realists maintain that the formulation of our concepts requires constant revision and reconstruction with reference to 'the objective source that gave rise to them . . . for that is the only way in which they can be renewed in their original force and rationality'.[7]

On this realist reckoning, the dynamic and innovative character of Christian thought and practice is a function of its participation in a reality transcendent of human formulations, whereas on the revisionist view it is a function of our ('classic' text-enabled) engagement with the 'limit-character of common human experience' through which we encounter and are able to interpret divine transcendence. That is, if theological realism and liberal revisionism are both able to account for

6. Ibid., pp. 203–4.   7. Torrance, *God and Rationality,* pp. 19–20.

new truth, they differ on whether this is an external truth which we dis-
cover as our concepts are brought into line with it and are able to grasp it,
or whether this is at least in part an internal truth (correlated with an
external truth) which we construct as a function of our God-endowed
and God-enabled creaturely experience and creativity. The pragmatic
and strongly christological focus of postliberal theology may point to a
way of uniting these oppositions.

Of course, conversely, the revisionist recognition of the creative
human contribution to God's ongoing work tends to be too generally
anthropocentric to take the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ
as absolute; thus Jesus is required to function as exemplary instance or
'classic' and Christian truth claims are interpreted according to what is
perceived to be transformative about *this* 'classic' for *this* experience in
this context. There again, the postliberal theology that recognizes the
text-and-tradition-groundedness of Christianity renders propositional
Christian truth claims internal to that tradition, so that, again, their
absoluteness appears qualified. Where for postliberals this simply
reflects the inescapably historical and traditional nature of life (and may
in fact allow for a human contribution to Christian truth), it can also be
construed as a fideistic form of relativism which privatizes truth in the
face of those truths' universal claims.

Accordingly, for each of these perspectives the others may serve as
prophetic 'voices of disorder' in a reciprocal pointing up of shortcom-
ings and confusions. Where realists are able to demonstrate how a post-
liberal bracketing of propositional truth is fundamentally destructive
of Christianity, both postliberals and revisionists have contended that
realists have been unable to accommodate adequately the implications
of the theory-ladenness of all observation and description. At first
glance, several pairings suggest themselves: first, postliberal and revi-
sionist theology share an acceptance of the culturally and linguistically
conditioned nature of human existence, although they differ in the
degree of particularity they assign to this. Where they are at odds is
where, secondly, realist and postliberal schools agree, namely on the
givenness of a Christian reality that absorbs and judges all human
formulations (although they differ on the nature of that reality). While
the similarities are to do with linguisticality on the one hand and
criteriality on the other, the differences come down to the differences
between what Hilary Putnam terms 'external' realism (in which facts
are context free) and 'internal' realism (in which facts are context deter-

mined).[8] Again, these differences may rest on assumptions that indicate the inadequacy of the present models.

Disorder may be an essential stage of reordering, as Daniel Hardy points out.[9] Both the complementarities and the conflicts in the above approaches indicate the need for a synthetic understanding able to combine insights from them all without departing from what is recognizably (even if revisably) the core of Christian belief. In response to this, some theologians from opposing schools have moved closer to each other in their awareness of the need to address Christian truth claims in the face of the complex nature of worldly existence.[10] If these theologies are all true in part (and false in part), it may be that their models are at fault – it is just as likely that their frameworks are too limited as that the insights are off-track. What is required is a hybridizing master model that is able to account for all the key insights and resolve some of the conflicts.

The aim of this inquiry is to come up with just such a synthesis, recognizing that to fill the bill such a model would need to be both content-relating and methodological and accordingly operate on two reciprocal levels. At the first-order level, it will aim to maximize the comprehensiveness of Christian theology through the incorporation of supplementary explanatory models that are able to account for, relate and extend the insights of the various schools of theology, in particular the insights concerning the nature of language, truth and reality. This is to be achieved without doing violence to the christological centre of Christianity while at the same time bearing in mind that logic also demands a doctrinal self-consistency which has been expressed classically in the trinitarian 'doctrine of doctrines'.

The imperative of self-consistency becomes methodological in requiring a second-order or meta-level exploration of the relation between models or paradigms. The relation of Christian theology to the models with which it interacts may be expressed in terms of relative power or priority, dynamics and stability (the maintainability of priority). The issue of comprehensiveness also enters at this level in connection with reductionist (for instance, dichotomizing) and synthetic interactions. A loss of

8. See, for instance, H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
9. D. W. Hardy, 'The Spirit of God in Creation and Reconciliation', in H. Regan and A. J. Torrance (eds.), *Christ and Context* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 237ff.
10. David Ford, Garrett Green, Colin Gunton, Daniel Hardy, George Hunsinger, Bruce Marshall, William Placher, Kenneth Surin and William Werpehowski are all arguably participants in this hybridizing movement.

comprehensiveness may occur not only when a rich model is commandeered by one that is less so, but also, conversely, when an impoverished model is utilized by a rich one. What is aimed for here is the bolstering of comprehensiveness without a concomitant loss of coherence.

What this inquiry aims *not* to do (and hopefully succeeds in) is to reject any theological position or insight out of court. Its hypothesis is that many seeming incompatibilities both between theological approaches, and between any approach and the classical doctrinal logic, are due more to confusion about how things fit together, or to the use of inadequate models, than to out-and-out wrongness. These difficulties should, therefore, be amenable to the sort of sifting and reordering of concepts afforded by the use of a new or expanded model. Methodologically, this is expressed in two ways: first, in the synthetic way indicated which requires that the critique of various approaches does not dig them up and throw them out in order to plant a new theory, but takes cuttings from them for grafting. Second, consequently, the line of argument is lateral as much as linear. The aim is to relate ideas and models to each other, exploring the dynamics of their interaction, while pursuing several lines of thought forward.

If we can assume that theologians all aim to seek the truth and to give glory to God without surrendering anything they regard as central to Christian belief and life, then the Thomist Principle of Charity should prevail in theological discourse as in biblical exegesis. We should read one another as trying to be truthful as well as Christian. What will prevent such a charitable reading is the 'in-groupness' that claims a competitive monopoly on truth for any one school. If progress is to be made in theology (or anywhere else for that matter) it will not be made by staying in old lines of thought or digging new ones deeper, but in lateral and synthetic developments. The preservation and development of what is good in the old lines may involve the questioning of some deeply rooted assumptions, but, as Fergus Kerr points out, 'If theologians proceed in the belief that they need neither examine nor even acknowledge their inherited metaphysical commitments, they will simply remain prisoners of whatever philosophical school was in the ascendant 30 years earlier, when they were first year students.'[11]

The main supplementary model this study utilizes is Wittgensteinian. To be Wittgensteinian in theology is less fashionable than it used to

11. F. Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 3.

be, perhaps because the way in which this has been pursued has given rise to certain prejudicial views about Wittgenstein's thinking. A Wittgensteinian approach has been typed (by Don Cupitt, for instance) as anti-realist or constructivist.[12] However, as Wittgenstein himself has pointed out, the edifices we build out of realist and anti-realist distinctions are themselves founded on the wrong questions.[13] This study aims to follow Kerr in the pursuit of a more helpful Wittgenstein.

A postmodern reality

This inquiry has, in its title, defined the 'age' as a 'postmodern' one, but what is meant by 'postmodern'? It is possible to advance either a strong or a weak thesis. It could be argued that local human contexts are their own watertight worlds or histories (story or narrative worlds) with a self-description and self-understanding that is particular to themselves and which, therefore, cannot be understood by anyone outside that world. Or it could be argued that they are their own worlds but not watertightly, inclined to leak and intermingle, but that reality and truth nevertheless come linguistically and contextually nuanced. To argue the strong case is not necessarily to claim that because human beings and their contexts are 'language-ridden' (a basic premise of postmodernity), human forms of life are linguistically constructed and all is therefore language. It is possible to argue that a particular context is a self-contained world without holding this view of language's scope and origins. Yet strong thesis devotees in holding the premise that stories go all the way down – that we never get out of stories at any level of our existence – are inclined to infer that the point of the story lies only in the telling. That is, the content of the telling is arbitrary; there are no meta-narratives as there is nothing beyond the 'local networks of signs that play out their patterns against the void'.[14]

A practical consequence of the strong thesis is that '*style* is everything; with massive commercial support, cultural options – even when their roots are in would-be dissident groupings – are developed and presented

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12. See D. Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: BBC, 1984).
13. 'We have been tempted into the habit of thinking that either *die Dinge* or *unsere Vorstellungen* must be the primary thing, but the choice between realism and idealism overlooks *das Leben*: that is Wittgenstein's suggestion' (Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, p. 133).
14. G. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 18. See, for instance, D. Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire* (London: SCM, 1987).

as consumer goods. Religious belief is no exception.'[15] Gerard Loughlin
has this Kafka-like vision of a postmodernist society as an endless shop-
ping mall with no exit, within which we wander about endlessly. The
Church buys into the shopping mall in becoming a sort of 'Gods"R"Us'
in which customers choose the religious style that fits them.

What this serves to underline is the main theological consequence
of the strong postmodern thesis: that on this thesis it is questionable
whether in the first place we can have such a thing as a single Christian-
ity in which its various contexts participate because a single Christianity
requires a master story, a central metanarrative. Arguably the coherence
of Christianity itself requires this because it rules out taking our essen-
tial humanity, whether general or particular, as primary. Or rather, to
persist with the suggestion that we might have a metanarrative and still
be postmodern is to dispense with the many watertight worlds of the
strong thesis. For if we are inclined to the view that metanarratives still
lurk in postmodernity – that there is always an implicit metanarrative in
any worldview – we are into the weak thesis.

This may be recognized as amounting to a species of critical realism.
Some claim it as belonging in late modernity; others would identify it as
postmodern. Helpfully it could be said to have a foot in both, as it allows
us to combine their insights while rejecting their mistakes. Loughlin
identifies two sorts of narrative theology that answer to the weak thesis
description in placing the emphasis on the content of the story as it is told
rather than on the telling itself. As Loughlin puts it, narrative theologians

> accept the ubiquity of language. They believe that our sense of the
> world is formed by the socially constructed discourses in which we
> find ourselves, and to which we contribute. We are embedded in
> language, as is language in us. There is a reciprocal relation between
> story and story-teller. As I recount my life-story, my story produces
> the 'I' which recounts it. I tell the story by which I am told. And since I
> am part of a larger community – one in which others tell stories about
> me, just as I tell stories about them – I am the product of many inter-
> related narratives, as is everyone else.[16]

In this weak thesis group the postliberal narrativists are to be dis-
tinguished from the liberal-revisionist ones such as David Tracy.[17] For

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15. R. Williams, 'Postmodern Theology and the Judgment of the World', in F. B. Burnham
(ed.), *Postmodern Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 92ff., 99–100.
16. Loughlin, *Telling God's Story,* p. 18.
17. See, for example, D. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San
Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

the latter any text can be a reality-revealing 'classic', in which to be human is above all to have a story – for being storied is integral to a general theory of human experience as primary. In this situation, if the Gospel is metanarrative, it is subject to another metanarrative, the human story, which is a collection of many local and particular human narratives or histories. The paradox of this type of postmodern theology – and this is a paradox that shows up the paradox in postmodernism generally – is that it takes a general theory of storied humanity to validate a model of religious experience as local and self-validating.

On the other hand, the postliberal narrative theologians take a christological metanarrative as the master story, the story within which we find all our stories, which determines the shape of our true reality. As Lindbeck puts it,

> the canonical Scriptures provide the basic narratives for how the Church imagines the world and itself in the world. The Church imagines itself within the narrative-world of the Bible, a written-world into which people can be 'inscribed'. Rather than understanding the Bible in worldly terms, the Christian understands the world in biblical ones; the Christian takes the biblical narratives, above all the narratives of Christ, as the fundamental story by which all others are to be understood, including his or her own story. 'The cross is not to be viewed as a figurative representation of suffering nor the messianic Kingdom viewed as a symbol for hope in the future; rather suffering should be cruciform, and hopes for the future messianic.[18]

Loughlin argues that this postliberal position is postmodern – and that it views Christianity itself as postmodern – because it sees Christianity as

> not founded on anything other than the performance of its story. It cannot be established against nihilism by reason, but only presented as a radical alternative, as something else altogether. It is also postmodern because its story – God's story – imagines a world 'out of nothing', a world of becoming, in which people are not fixed essences but life-narratives with a future.[19]

Certainly the postliberal position seems consistent with the weak postmodern one that allows metanarratives but insists that they are always contextually nuanced. And this position allows us to argue that Christianity without a master-story, a metanarrative, ceases to be Christianity while at the same time arguing that it is too uncritically

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18. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 118, quoted in Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, p. 18.
19. Loughlin, p. 21.

realist, too simplistic to hold that in sharing the one Gospel all Christian confessions and contexts proclaim the same reality. For this amounts to treating our own context as invisible or transparent. To accept the weak postmodern thesis is to be prepared to accept both the necessity of a Christian metanarrative and the existence of many small local worlds to which the Gospel is to be proclaimed and within which therefore it is to be Gospel.

Yet it is not quite as simple as that either. If theology is to be post-modern in the weak sense – that is, more in a critical-realist sense – then the dialectic between Scripture and tradition ceases to be self-contained. There is a reality outside of texts and their interpreting traditions, a reality which awaits conversion to the text and the tradition, but which itself brings aspects of itself into a dialectical encounter with the special revelation. Reading is world-involving; if the text reads the world, the world also reads the text. We always view the world from a particular theological place – there is no God's-eye view, system-neutral position from which we can get at the truth – and yet this particular theological place is also a particular faith-traditional and particular cultural place. The theology indwells the context and the context the theology, and from this intermingling comes new facets of revelation. As Loughlin points out, the text does not become revelatory until it is read by a reader – until it connects with lives, and not merely with ecclesial doctrinal formulations. If theology is a matter of working at understanding the content of faith and the world from a position in which the truth has already been revealed specific to that context and simply requires exegesis according to a doctrinal intrasystemic logic, then it is hard to see how, if it is to be postmodern in the strong sense, theology can be anything other than sectarian.

Yet to argue that reality is language-ridden, inextricably interpreted and reinterpreted, is not the same as to claim that we cannot judge things about Christianity at all – that we just have to take each local variety as we find it. Christian theology cannot take any one facet or aspect of life in the world as being whole and adequate on its own terms for this denies the common thread, the christological metanarrative that interacts with and ultimately judges all our stories, that shows us that no one rendering of Christ is complete and undistorted. We are simply not Christian enough on our own. It *is* to say that Christianity constitutes a world, a reality, a self-defining comprehensiveness that we have to stand within to understand on its own terms, for to attempt to understand it