

Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination

The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of
Modernity

GARRETT GREEN



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I

Theological hermeneutics in the twilight of modernity

When philosophy paints its gray on gray, a form of life has grown old, and with gray on gray it cannot be rejuvenated but merely recognized. The Owl of Minerva begins her flight only at the coming of twilight.

Hegel

... there are no facts, only *interpretations*.

Nietzsche

Theological hermeneutics began in the Garden of Eden, as any careful observer of the serpent, that subtle hermeneut of suspicion, will at once recognize. In the earliest recorded misinterpretation of a religious text, he asks the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” We do not need to have read Foucault in order to discern the power ploy underlying the serpent’s exegesis. And even without a Freudian or a feminist to decode the real meaning of snakes who offer their interpretive services to young women, we may suspect that gender (not to mention sex) plays a role in the interchange. Now, whether or not the issues we call hermeneutical have really been

The first epigraph is from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie 1818–1831*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting (Stuttgart/Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1974), vol. II, p. 74; the second is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, § 481 (my translation).

around since creation, they have surely been with us for a very long time indeed – as long as human beings have appealed to oral or written texts for orientation and meaning in their lives.

Even though issues of textual interpretation have ancient roots, however, there is something inescapably *modern* about the seemingly intractable hermeneutical questions that we encounter so frequently in theology and religious studies today; and it is the modern discussion on which I plan to focus our attention in the following chapters. If we could discover why it is that virtually every important religious issue from the late seventeenth century onward leads ineluctably to hermeneutical questions, I think we would have the key to modernity itself. Now I am not so rash as to suggest that I can deliver that key. But I think I know the direction in which theologians should be looking for it: namely, in the interpretation of the Bible, together with all the attendant issues of authority, canon, and meaning. Moreover, the problem of scriptural interpretation is an important clue to the obsession with hermeneutics that afflicts not only Christian theology but virtually every humanistic discipline today. Even though theological hermeneutics therefore has implications for various fields, I intend to concentrate on these issues as they impinge specifically on Christian theology. But that does not mean my remarks are intended only for the ears of Christians, or of academic theologians. I cannot share in the theological separatism that has recently become fashionable in some theological circles, because I do not believe that the church exists as a distinct linguistic community separated from the secular society that surrounds it. The line that separates religious language from secular, that distinguishes Christian discourse from the many other forms of modern and postmodern speech, runs not around the perimeter of the Christian community but right through the middle of the church itself. Speaking for myself, I can say that the line runs through me, through my own experience and

therefore through my attempts to think about what it means to live as a follower of Jesus Christ in the present age. Thinking Christianly about the interpretation of scripture is therefore not something Christians can do by withdrawing from the secular world into a realm of allegedly pure biblical or ecclesiastical discourse. Likewise, and for similar reasons, secular humanists, those who deny the Christian vision and reject its hope, cannot ignore two thousand years of theological tradition, for it has helped to shape them and remains in important ways a part of themselves. So I invite you, whether you see yourself as a Christian insider struggling with the meaning of the Bible in the modern world, or as an outsider to the Christian faith, to join me in thinking through some fascinating and baffling challenges to the claim that the Bible should continue to be the source and norm for human life today, in the twilight of modernity, just as it has been for generations of Christians before us.

Hermeneutics demystified

Those uninitiated into the mysteries of academic theology, philosophy, or literary criticism may be excused for paling upon seeing a phrase like “theological hermeneutics.” Let me hasten to assure such readers that even those of us accustomed to chatting away in the argot of our disciplines are not necessarily any clearer about interpretation, or able to read texts any better, than many a lay member of the church or reader of books from the public library. Indeed, I believe that in some cases hermeneutical theory has actually obscured interpretive practices that good nonspecialist readers know implicitly. But that, of course, is the rub: scholars want to make explicit what lay people know implicitly. And when lay people become confused about practices they once took for granted – as in the case of the Bible over the past two or three centuries – scholars attempt to shine a theoretic light into the cultural murk in the hope that it may aid us in finding our way back to the path. Theories of this kind generally go under the name

hermeneutics. Hans Frei, who did so much to clarify the issues surrounding the modern interpretation of the Bible, once noted that “Hermeneutics, by and large, is a word that is forever chasing a meaning.”¹ He also liked to point out that it used to mean something far more straightforward in premodern times than it has come to mean in the past couple of centuries. And unlike most theologians today, he also preferred to use the word in its older, more straightforward sense.

Put most simply, hermeneutics is the “theory of interpretation.”² Even that definition may be too formal, since hermeneutics originated, not among philosophers or theologians in search of a theory, but among biblical interpreters, who compiled lists of rules one should follow in order rightly to interpret scripture. Out of this originally practical need for guidelines in reading the Bible, there eventually emerged the theoretical enterprise of hermeneutics. One reason for the widespread perception that hermeneutics is an especially dense and arcane field of inquiry is the direction taken by modern hermeneutical theory in its dominant line of development since the early nineteenth century. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who is widely acknowledged to be a major figure in modern Christian theology, has also been called “the father of modern hermeneutics” because he is the one responsible for developing it into a philosophical theory of understanding.³ Schleiermacher’s approach was developed by later thinkers, the most important of whom are Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans Georg Gadamer. For recent theology and religious studies, this tradition is represented by such thinkers as Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy. In this tradition – which is frequently simply identified with the

¹ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 1.

³ See, for example, Jeanrond, *ibid.*, pp. 44ff.

enterprise called hermeneutics – the focus of attention shifts from the interpretation of texts to the nature of human understanding. From its beginnings in Schleiermacher right up to the present day, hermeneutics as understood in this way has been concerned with (in Frei’s words) “the notion of a unitary and systematic theory of understanding” rather than “the older view of hermeneutics as a set of technical and *ad hoc* rules for reading.”⁴ Frei offers compelling reasons, which I shall not repeat here, for rejecting this modern sort of hermeneutical theory in favor of an approach more like the older *ad hoc* variety.⁵

There is a still more substantial reason – a specifically theological one – for eschewing the approach of modern hermeneutical theory. One of the hallmarks of modern theology (for which Schleiermacher is once again a paradigmatic figure) has been its tendency to preface the work of theology proper – what has been traditionally called dogmatics – with methodological prolegomena, whose purpose is to locate theology on the map of the academic disciplines, to describe its warrants and proper method of inquiry, and to justify it to the wider academic community – before one actually begins to do theology. The first 125 pages of Schleiermacher’s chief work of systematic theology, *The Christian Faith* (or *Glaubenslehre*), is the classic example, in which he “borrows” theses from other disciplines in order to describe and justify theology in terms of extratheological criteria.⁶ One can find countless examples of similarly non-theological introductions in the works of theology produced since Schleiermacher’s day. Indeed, in the twentieth

⁴ Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 124.

⁵ For Frei’s argument, see his essay “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?,” in *Theology and Narrative*, pp. 117–52, and George Hunsinger’s summary of his case against Ricoeur and Tracy in the volume introduction, pp. 15–18.

⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928). This work is commonly referred to as the *Glaubenslehre* (“Doctrine of Faith”).

century many works of academic theology amount to little more than extended prolegomena to theology. (In other words, theologians are forever telling us what it is they would be doing should they ever actually *do* any theology!) As theology has been progressively marginalized in modern society and academia, one could say, its quest for identity and justification as a discipline has threatened to become its primary subject matter. Karl Barth, more than any other modern theologian, exposed the self-contradictory and self-defeating character of doing theology in this way, and taught us instead to see that theological definition and methodology are properly theological enterprises – part of the subject matter of theology, not a preliminary activity in which one engages before starting to do theology. To see the practical effects of this point of view, one need only compare the table of contents of his *Church Dogmatics* with that of Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre*. Barth's first volume does indeed contain a discussion of the nature of the discipline of theology and its proper method, but he calls it not "Prolegomena" or "Introduction" but "The Doctrine of the Word of God."⁷ As such it does not precede his dogmatics but rather comprises its opening chapter. Barth also has much to say about the issues of theological hermeneutics, yet he produced no work with such a title (nor one that might appropriately be given that title) because these reflections form an integral part of his dogmatics.

The theological character of theological hermeneutics is an instance of what is frequently called the "hermeneutical circle." I am tempted to say "the much overrated hermeneutical circle," for I am convinced that it is neither as troublesome nor as interesting as most writers on hermeneutics seem to assume; but that case cannot be made until a little later, when we get to the question of postmodernity

⁷ Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* (Zurich: TVZ, 1932–67), vol. I, part 1; *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–69), vol. I, part 1, 2nd edn. (1975).

and the paradigmatic imagination. Werner Jeanrond identifies two “dimensions” of the hermeneutical circle.⁸ The first is produced by the fact that “we need some form of prior understanding in order to begin our engagement with a text or work of art,” a situation that can be described in a way that sounds paradoxical or worse: we cannot understand something unless we already have a preliminary understanding of it; but if we already understand it, even preliminarily, our understanding will be biased or “subjective.” The circularity of the situation is troublesome to the extent that one assumes there to be a neutral vantage point for understanding, from which one can gain an “objective” view of things. But that is an assumption that fewer and fewer people are prepared to make (more on this later, when we venture into postmodernism). Jeanrond’s other form of the hermeneutical circle “consists in the fact that we can never understand a whole without understanding all of its parts; nor can we adequately understand the parts without seeing them functioning in the overall composition to which they contribute.” In other words, understanding the whole presupposes an understanding of the parts; but understanding the parts presupposes that one has understood the whole. This form of the hermeneutical circle is more interesting, for it turns out to be an indicator of the holistic nature of human perception and understanding, and thus a basic clue to the paradigmatic imagination.⁹ Again, it is troublesome only to the extent that one remains committed to epistemological neutrality. At any rate, it is undeniable that interpretation has an inherently circular logic, and Barth’s insistence on defining theology theologically indicates his acknowledgment of that hermeneutical circularity.

I propose accordingly to discuss the issues raised by the

⁸ See Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, pp. 5–6. The surprising brevity of Jeanrond’s account is, I think, a sign of the inflated character of the “hermeneutical circle.”

⁹ See Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), especially chapters 3 and 4.

hermeneutics of suspicion, not as a prolegomenon or pro-paedeutic to Christian theology, but as an exercise *in* Christian theology. This volume, in other words, might appropriately be classified under “theological hermeneutics” only if this phrase is preceded by no definite or indefinite article, expressed or implied: what you are about to read, then, is not *a* theological hermeneutics (much less, heaven forbid, *Die theologische Hermeneutik!*) but rather an *ad hoc* theological exploration of some pressing hermeneutical issues confronting us today. And because we do not live in hermetically sealed linguistic universes, as I indicated earlier, I am hopeful that this piece of theologizing might also be of interest, and perhaps even of use, to those who are neither Christians nor theologians.

Modern or postmodern?

I have already found it impossible to avoid another exasperating, if trendy, term: “postmodern.” (Professor Frei once confessed that “in the next life, if I have any choice, there will be two terms that I shall eschew, one is ‘hermeneutics,’ the other is ‘narrative!’”¹⁰ I should like to add “postmodern” to the list. But just as Frei, in this life, found it necessary to speak frequently of both hermeneutics and narrative, I seem to be stuck with postmodern.) So I would like to introduce a distinction, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, between two senses of “postmodern.” The first, which may be called *descriptive postmodernism*, is simply a way of referring to the “nonfoundationalist” situation that increasingly characterizes our cultural world. If modernity is defined by the Enlightenment appeal to universal norms to which in principle we have access through the right use of reason, postmodernity can be defined in negative terms as the rejection of that possibility. Modernist thinkers seek to ground our knowledge and experience of the world in certain incorrigible foundational truths or experiences. If

¹⁰ Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, p. 155.

we define the modern in this way, the postmodern begins wherever foundationalist certainty ends. The descriptive use of the term “postmodern” neither celebrates nor vilifies; it simply points to the cultural-historical fact that we seem to have lost the foundationalist certainty in universal criteria that transcend traditions, cultures, and languages. In this sense, to describe our situation as postmodern is simply to take note of the fact that fewer people today are willing to accept the “modernist” axiom that there are universal norms of truth and morals, transcultural and trans-historical, to which we have access through reason. But there is also a *doctrinaire* or *normative postmodernism*, flourishing especially among continental philosophers and their disciples, which denies that texts have any determinate meaning of the kind that modernist interpreters presuppose. This latter kind of postmodernism is a philosophical doctrine – one of several that respond to the postmodern situation in the descriptive sense. My distinction between descriptive and normative postmodernism, I should point out, is not the same as John Milbank’s attempt to distinguish “benign” from “malign” forms of postmodernism. The former, he says, remains “optimistic about the possibility of admitting irreducible difference, and the historical situatedness of all truth-claims, without lapsing into a perspectivism which denies absolute truth and value altogether.”¹¹ This benign postmodernism, which Milbank finds exemplified in Alasdair MacIntyre, represents a sympathetic if not finally satisfactory attempt to recover classical and Christian tradition in a postmodern age. The other, “malign” variety of postmodernism is Milbank’s primary target, the avowed enemy of Christianity, which he also calls “Nietzschean postmodernism” or (more often) simply “nihilism.” Both of Milbank’s types fall under what I am calling normative postmodernism, because both are

¹¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 61.

philosophical responses to the situation depicted by descriptive postmodernism. I will be exploring the roots of normative postmodernism in Nietzsche in chapter 5, and examining a contemporary version in the thought of Jacques Derrida in chapter 6. In the meantime, I will be using the word in its descriptive sense, without implying any predilection for the doctrinaire kind of postmodernism. As will become evident, however, I am not nearly as convinced as Milbank that this kind of postmodern thought can simply be dismissed as “malign.”

Remaining for the time being, then, at the level of description, ought we to describe our cultural present as postmodern? There can be little doubt that modernist axioms have come increasingly under criticism, and a number of contemporary intellectuals are proclaiming the arrival of the postmodern age. Even some of the leading postmodernist philosophers, however, hesitate simply to declare the end of modernity. Jean-François Lyotard, for one, prefers to see the postmodern as a continuing possibility arising out of the modern. Calling postmodernism “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies,” he prefers to describe it as “undoubtedly a part of the modern” rather than an age following upon and supplanting the modern.¹² So, rather than simply describing the contemporary cultural situation as postmodern, I will adopt a more modest discourse, employing the metaphor of twilight – an image that echoes Hegel’s Owl of Minerva as well as the language of Nietzsche’s madman – suggesting that modernity is not simply past and gone but rather survives in a state of profound crisis and self-doubt. As Hegel’s owl knew, twilight is a particularly favorable vantage point from which to look back over the course we have traveled in order better to understand our present situation and the

¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi in *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. X (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. xxiii, 79.

demands and choices it forces upon us. What some now refer to as the “project of Enlightenment”¹³ (usually in the past tense) continues to exert a powerful cultural force, though it can no longer simply be taken for granted. For theology to side too quickly with the enemies of Enlightenment would, I believe, be a grave error (a claim I will try to substantiate in later chapters). For the time being, I will assume that we inhabit a liminal world, in which the confident universalism of the Enlightenment is giving way to something new, the precise shape of which is not yet evident. Whether Christians should welcome it or not remains an open question, but they can ignore it only at their peril.

The hermeneutics of suspicion

Paul Ricoeur, who is both a Christian in the Reformed tradition and a major figure in contemporary hermeneutical theory, has contributed an important historical thesis about the origins of the modern crisis of interpretation. His name for this development, the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” has become a familiar watchword employed in theology and religious studies, and not only by those who are persuaded by his constructive hermeneutical theory. His historical analysis of the problem has proved even more influential than his own philosophical attempts to respond to it. I propose to take Ricoeur’s historical insight (though not his constructive hermeneutics) as a point of departure, a provisional posing of the modern and postmodern problem of interpretation for which we urgently need to discover an adequate theological response.

According to Ricoeur’s historical analysis, a major break occurred in the nineteenth century that has fundamentally altered the way people today read the authoritative texts of their traditions, especially the Bible. This hermeneutical revolution, which he believes to be irreversible, is epitomized by the thinkers he calls “the three masters of

¹³ For example, Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 260.

suspicion – Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.”¹⁴ Though each taken alone has serious flaws, together they constitute a powerful critique of culture, focusing especially on religion – a critique that can be summarized in Marx’s term *false consciousness*. This critique is of an unprecedented kind, “completely different from the critique of religion that is rooted in the tradition of British empiricism and French positivism.” According to the analyses of these masters of suspicion, Ricoeur writes, “Religion has a meaning that remains unknown to the believer by virtue of a specific act of dissimulation which conceals its true origin from the investigation of consciousness.”¹⁵ In Marx the concealed meaning of religion lies in its relation to class struggle and economic interests, in Nietzsche to motives of resentment and the vengeance of the weak against the strong, and in Freud to repressed desires of aggression and especially sexuality. But Ricoeur is more interested in what they have in common, namely a *suspicion* of religious faith rooted in a new kind of doubt that “is totally . . . different from Cartesian doubt.”¹⁶ This new doubt is not so much epistemological as moral; it undermines the credibility of religion by attacking not its objects of belief (at least not directly) but rather its motives. “After the doubt about things,” Ricoeur states aphoristically, “we have started to doubt consciousness.”¹⁷ Merold Westphal characterizes the common hermeneutic of suspicion in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as follows: “the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behavior and our beliefs are

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “The Critique of Religion,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 28 (1973): 205.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 442.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, “The Critique of Religion,” p. 206.

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 33.

shaped by values we profess to disown.”¹⁸ As I shall argue in chapter 5, the situation is rather more complex in the case of Nietzsche, who is both an example of the modern hermeneutic of suspicion and the precursor of a distinctly postmodern suspicion. Before we get to that point, however, there is one more major term to be introduced into the discussion: imagination.

Interpretation and the paradigmatic imagination

Ricoeur makes a persuasive case for the seminal importance of the three great “masters of suspicion”; the tremendous cultural impact of the ideas of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud would be hard to overestimate. In order fully to grasp the significance of their new kind of suspicious hermeneutics, however, it is necessary to take a step back and to look at the philosopher who deserves to be called the father of the suspicious critique of religion – the *Urmeister* of suspicion, we might say – Ludwig Feuerbach. With the help of a new interpretation of Feuerbach’s critique of religion by Van A. Harvey,¹⁹ I will argue in chapter 4 that the basic moves later articulated by Ricoeur’s triumvirate have their origin in Feuerbach – in both the famous (or infamous) argument of *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and his lesser-known later theory of religion, which Harvey thinks is not only different but superior. I will argue, furthermore, that even Harvey overlooks the significance of the *object* of Feuerbach’s critique, the religious imagination. The later hermeneutics of suspicion developed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are unquestionably more sophisticated and (with all due respect to Professor Harvey) more persuasive than Feuerbach’s often heavy-handed projectionism and naturalism. But Feuerbach in his unnuanced way enables us to see something highly significant about suspicious

¹⁸ Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), p. 13; Westphal’s italics.

¹⁹ Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

hermeneutics – namely, the object of suspicion. By rather ingenuously combining the descriptive claim that imagination is the engine of religion with the tendentious judgment that religious consciousness is therefore false consciousness, Feuerbach gives us the clue to the mainspring of modernist suspicion about religion.

Here the shift from a modern to a postmodern context becomes hermeneutically significant. For the modernist – and Feuerbach is a virtually pure example of the species – imagination, unless it remains securely subject to critical reason, has the potential to become the source of speculation, fantasy, and illusion. As such, “imagination” is the diametric opposite of “reality”; it is the organ of fiction and error. At the root of the modernist hermeneutic of suspicion is the following assumption: religion is the product of imagination; *therefore* religious claims are untrue. In Feuerbach this reasoning appears on the surface; but it is there as well in Marx and Freud, though usually presented in more sophisticated language and often disguised in subtle ways. It is also evident in the “modernist Nietzsche,” who rails against Jews’ and Christians’ hatred of “reality.” As soon as one makes the postmodern turn, however, the first thing to go is the foundational confidence that we have reliable access to a “reality” against which imagination might be judged “illusory.” Imagination now becomes the unavoidable means of apprehending “reality,” though there is, of course, no guarantee that it will succeed.

The new place of imagination is nowhere more evident than in recent philosophy of science, which one might summarize by saying that the history of science is the history of the scientific imagination, the narrative of the successive paradigms that have held sway in communities of scientists for shorter or longer periods, enabling them to agree about the theory, methods, and results of their research. At the popular level there is no better indicator of the shift from modern to postmodern than the fate of interest in “science and religion.” In the heyday of modernism a century ago,

military metaphors prevailed: the “warfare between science and religion”; the “conflict between science and theology.”²⁰ One of the strongest indicators that modernity survives in our world is the persistent popular assumption that science and religion are somehow fundamentally opposed. For those on the postmodern side of the divide, on the other hand, scientific discovery increasingly appears as an analog of religious conversion – and vice versa. Modern culture – virtually by definition, as I see it – has taken its authoritative paradigms from modern science. From Galileo and Newton to Einstein and Stephen Hawking, the reigning scientific models of the cosmos have provided the larger culture with powerful analogies and metaphors that shape its epistemology, its poetry, its politics, and its religion. Here the postmodern shows itself in continuity with modernity, for many of the leading postmodernist ideas borrow much of their imagery and not a little of their social prestige from scientific notions of relativity, uncertainty, and incommensurability. It is therefore prudent for theologians to ponder the relation of their work to the world of modern science.

As dangerous as it sounds to orthodox believers who still hear with “modern” ears, the thesis that religion – including the Christian religion – is a product of human imagination ought to be accepted, and even welcomed, by theologians today.²¹ For, if we have truly left the security of foundationalist apologetics behind, what else *could* it be? To insist that our truth claims are not mediated by imagination is to claim unique exemption from the limits of

²⁰ These phrases come from the titles of two influential works, John William Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and Andrew Dickson White’s *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, 2 vols. (1896). See John Kent, “Religion & Science,” in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, ed. Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Steven Katz and Patrick Sherry (Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. III, pp. 1–36.

²¹ My book *Imagining God* is an attempt to articulate and defend this thesis. The argument in this paragraph amounts to a summary of conclusions that are more fully presented and argued in that book.

bodily and historical existence to which our contemporaries are subject. It is also – as I shall try to show in the last two chapters – a sign of faithlessness toward the God whom we acknowledge to be the author and guarantor of those truths, a claim of ownership over goods that we have been granted in trust. To acknowledge, on the other hand, that we hold those truths as stewards rather than as masters, in the earthen vessels of imaginative paradigms, is a sign that we have indeed heard the gospel message contained in those very truths. The mark of the Christian in the twilight of modernity is therefore imaginative faithfulness, trust in the faithfulness of the God who alone guarantees the conformity of our images to reality, and who has given himself to us in forms that may only be grasped by imagination.

The emerging postmodern context, especially as it appears in the sciences, may thus be more hospitable to theological work than the modern world it is rapidly supplanting. The reason can be simply stated: an intellectual culture that thought it had achieved access to secure, secular foundations for human knowledge and behavior – and saw itself therefore as the legitimate successor to an antiquated religious enterprise – is giving way to a culture that acknowledges that all data are theory-laden, all theories based on paradigms, all knowing dependent on imagination. In short, the postmodern sensibility acknowledges that the use of reason not only does not oppose, but necessarily entails, some kind of faith. Nietzsche's claim that there are no facts but only interpretations is an emblem of that sensibility. Taken in one direction (the one usually associated with postmodernism), the point sounds either cynical or playful, depending on the mood of the postmodernist. If you are John Milbank, it sounds positively malign, the nihilistic opposite to the peaceable kingdom of Christian social theory. Since there are no facts, say the postmodernists, there is no "truth," and we are left with an endless spinning out of interpretations – which is either (in

the cynical version) grounds for despair or (in the playful version) the occasion to delight in the creativity of the imagination. Neither of these options holds much promise for reading the Bible as scripture.

There is another way, however, to read the Nietzschean aphorism, and it runs like this: There are no facts – that is, there is no theory-neutral foundation against which to measure interpretations – because “facts” are themselves a function of interpretation. We can continue to appeal to the facts, to aim at a truth beyond our own subjectivity, as long as we remember that all theoretical concepts, even the concept of *facts*, are paradigm-dependent. In other words, right interpretation depends on right imagination; whether we get things right or not is a function not only of our intelligence and powers of observation but also of the lenses through which we observe. If this situation epitomizes the postmodern world, then theologians may hope once again to become serious participants in the cultural conversation. An Enlightenment that thought it had discovered the foundation of all knowledge marginalized theology as the domain of mere faith. A postmodernity that acknowledges the fiduciary element inherent in all human activity cannot reasonably exclude theology on the grounds that it appeals to faith. Modernists are quick to label as “fideist” any enterprise that does not play by their rules; postmodernists know that the Enlightenment is no longer the only game in town. In Judaism, because it has always been a minority religion, the relationship between religious commitment and the modern world has been clearer than it has been for Christians, who until fairly recently could identify their own norms with those of the wider community. The emergence of Jewish Orthodoxy, as Jacob Katz has pointed out, is not simply the perpetuation of earlier Jewish tradition into modernity but rather a self-conscious commitment to a tradition that can no longer simply be taken for granted. The experience of Jews in the modern world foreshadows

the stance of faith for Christians in a postmodern age: “loyalty to tradition [is] the result of a conscious decision.”²² The properly biblical metaphor for minority existence for both Jews and Christians, as I shall develop in the final chapter, is exile. And exile is not as dire a situation as might be supposed, as long as we continue to hold in imagination’s eye the vision that enlightens our present darkness – or twilight – and draws us forward into the future that our Lord has gone ahead to prepare for us.

Intimations of things to come

Finally, let me offer a brief overview of the arguments presented in the following chapters.

Debates about postmodernity have focused, for good reason, on the interpretation of texts – especially culturally authoritative texts, among which scriptures represent the most authoritative of all. The point at which the late modern crisis of interpretation touches theology most directly, therefore, is the authority and interpretation of the Bible. I plan accordingly first to take an owl’s-eye look at a few of the major figures who have influenced the way we read the Bible in the twilight of modernity. The purpose of this exercise (like all historical theology) will be twofold: to better understand our situation by grasping how we got into it in the first place, and at the same time to reopen questions which have seemed to be closed for us during the reign of Enlightenment modernism. Nietzsche is surely right that something central to European culture and civilization has died, or is dying; whether it is a God or an idol, however, is not nearly so clear. (Even here, Nietzsche may have got it right despite himself: for he speaks not only of the death of God but also of the twilight of the idols.)

The first voice we will hear belongs to that supreme definer and advocate of Enlightenment himself, Immanuel

²² Jacob Katz, “Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective,” in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry II*, ed. Peter Y. Medding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 4.

Kant. A closer look with our twilight-sensitized eyes at what he says about religion, and about the Christian religion in particular, will bring into view the central theological issue of modernity: what in the eighteenth century was called “positive religion.” Kant’s attempt to “interpret away” the offensive positivity of the gospel thus comes to epitomize the modernist way in theology, becoming the model for what I call accommodationist theology. Our unique vantage point at the end of modernity also makes us able to hear clearly for perhaps the first time a uniquely Christian voice crying in the enlightened wilderness of eighteenth-century Königsberg: Johann Georg Hamann, the “Wise Man from the North.” His uncannily prescient metacritique of Enlightenment criticism in its heyday offers us some useful hermeneutical hints now that the mainstream of European culture is catching up at last with his insights.

The next historical figure to whom we shall listen introduces the issue of suspicion, which Ricoeur takes as the hallmark of the great hermeneutical sea-change in modern culture. As I have already indicated, I will argue that the corrosive suspicion that Ricoeur has taught us to associate with the triumvirate of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in fact received its original impulse from Feuerbach, the forgotten father of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Attending to his voice with late modern ears will allow us to hear more clearly the source and target of his suspicion, the imagination. Imagination, according to Feuerbach, is both the engine of religion and the ground of its falsity. The suspicion of imagination (or perhaps we should say the suspicious imagination) in the nineteenth century achieves its most brilliant and extreme expression in the figure of Friedrich Nietzsche, who makes the Christian vision of the world into the Great Lie. At the same time, this foe of the gospel focuses attention on the crucial issues that theology must face, and does so with greater clarity than most of Christianity’s “friends.”

Before turning explicitly to the theology of suspicion and trust in our late modern present, we will need to consider the most recent variety of hermeneutical suspicion – one that takes Nietzsche as its inspiration and claims for itself the label “postmodern.” Of the several voices we might usefully consider, I have chosen Jacques Derrida as representative of the most influential and hermeneutically interesting form of postmodernism. The perspective of deconstruction, by apparently undermining the claims of every text to stability, let alone self-sufficiency, appears to present the ultimate threat to any acknowledgment of biblical authority. Nevertheless, the striking if unexpected hermeneutical similarities between Derrida’s philosophy of signs and Karl Barth’s theology of signs show that deconstruction ought not to be viewed simply as a threat to theology but rather as the secular counterpart to some of its own deepest hermeneutical convictions.

The cumulative effect of the various forms that the hermeneutics of suspicion has taken over the past two centuries has been to call into question the very possibility of taking a set of written texts as the norm for life and thought – something that most, if not all, of the world’s religions do in one form or another. Under the suspicious eye of (post)modern critique, every faith in scriptural authority appears as a form of false consciousness, every sacred text as a surreptitious rhetoric of power. The rise of suspicion in the nineteenth century is integrally related to a major shift in the way modern Christian culture has read the Bible: it is the other face of what Hans Frei has identified as the eclipse of biblical narrative. As Christians stopped imagining the world through the lens of scripture, they began trying to accommodate the Bible to secular visions of reality – thus reversing the direction of interpretation and preparing the way for the radically suspicious hermeneutical projects of Feuerbach and his spiritual children, and precipitating the hermeneutical crisis of modern and postmodern culture that we have been investigating. A

Christian hermeneutics suited to the twilight of modernity must begin by taking the *sensus literalis* of the biblical text with renewed seriousness – that is, by appropriating the scriptural paradigm of the world as the place where God makes himself available to human imagination. Imagining God and the world scripturally requires the hard work of never-completed interpretation, under the pressure of the hermeneutic imperative. As Hamann recognized in the eighteenth century, the world imagined Christianly is *deutungsbedürftig*, continually in need of interpretation. This task is not an onerous one imposed upon us, whether by sin or the critique of unbelief, but is the hermeneutical consequence of living in a divinely created world, the yearning of the human spirit for its source in God.

Christian theologians have responded to the hermeneutics of suspicion in various ways: by treating it as a useful tool that can be adapted to theological purposes (liberation and feminist theologies); by attempting to appropriate the suspicious perspective by redescribing it in Christian categories (Westphal); or by subjecting the hermeneutics of suspicion to a kind of metasuspicion that attempts to turn the tables on the critics by exposing their own presuppositions to doubt (Milbank). While each of these responses offers useful insights that can contribute to a Christian theology of suspicion and trust, none is finally adequate. A properly theological response cannot treat suspicion merely as a positive or a negative impulse from *outside* the source of theology. When theology attends to its proper task of describing the grammar of scriptural imagination, it discovers a source of suspicion potentially and actually more radical than that advocated by any of the secular “masters of suspicion.” The final chapter will thus examine, first of all, the biblical grounds for that suspicion in what I call the “hermeneutics of the cross.” But since every kind of suspicion depends, whether explicitly or implicitly, upon a trust of some kind, the real question raised by the hermeneutics of suspicion is the ground of its trust. For Christians

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that trust, which we call faith in the God of Jesus Christ, commits us to a form of suspicion more radical than the secular kinds because it is the hermeneutical expression of God's judgment. And since God's judgment is always the shadow of his grace, Christians are able to live their lives and do their thinking in the hopeful insecurity of the faithful imagination.