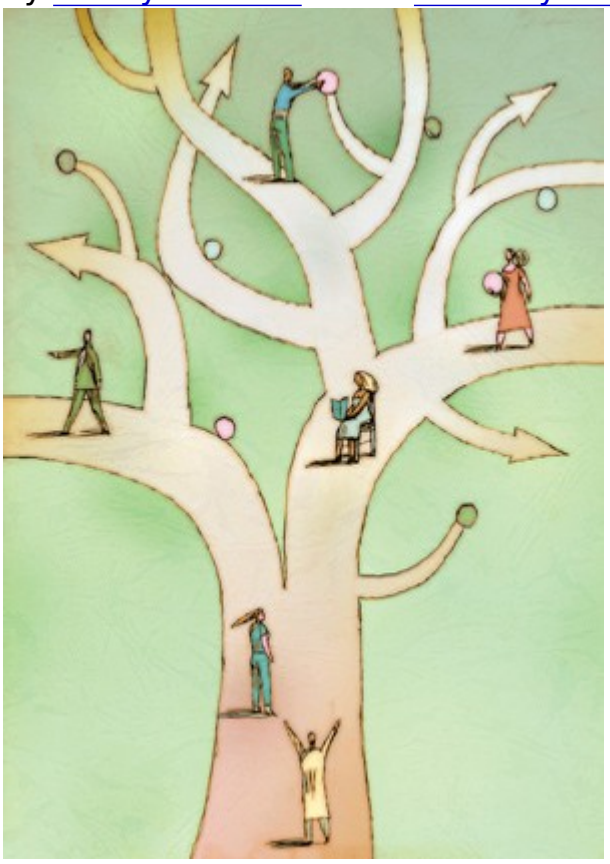
Christian claims

by Kathryn Tanner in the February 23, 2010 issue



Todd Davidson

It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century *series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the third in the series.*

When I was in the doctoral program of Yale's Religious Studies Department in the early 1980s (working primarily with Hans Frei, George Lindbeck and Louis Dupré), the main worries of theologians and philosophers of religion were methodological in nature: Could religious thought and language be intellectually justified? Did religious thought and language, for example, meet general standards of meaning, intelligibility and truth? One might argue—as Frei and Lindbeck did with an ironic

display of academic rigor informed by the latest philosophy, literary theory and social science—that they need not do so to be intellectually respectable. Epistemological issues (for example, how meaning and truth were conveyed linguistically through signs and symbols) and biblical hermeneutics were the bread and butter of our studies.

Methodological preoccupations distinguished theological schools (Yale and the University of Chicago) and informed the teaching of the history of Christian thought, another mainstay of the doctoral program at Yale. Frei and Lindbeck often half-jokingly quipped that one day they would eventually *do* theology, rather than spend all their time talking about how to go about it. But neither, it turns out, made much headway on that front while I was at Yale as a student and then as a faculty member during the 1980s and early 1990s. Any movement by Frei in that direction was tragically cut short by his premature death in 1988, and Lindbeck's energy was increasingly taken up with response to his influential and controversial *Nature of Doctrine*, published in 1984, understood at the time not primarily as a work in comparative doctrine by a historically learned ecumenist, but as the methodological manifesto of the so-called Yale School of Theology.

The hopes of my teachers for their own work came to fruition with the next generation of theologians, of which I count myself a member. Typical of this new generation of theologians—whatever their methodological commitments—is a willingness to make constructive claims of a substantive sort through the critical reworking of Christian ideas and symbols to address the challenges of today's world, a willingness to venture a new Christian account of the world and our place in it with special attention to the most pressing problems and issues of contemporary life. Pick up almost any work in theology at present and you are liable to find a discussion of the Trinity and its implications for politics; or a reformulation of God's relation to creation as an impetus to ecological responsibility; or a rethinking of the atonement in light of trauma theory. Frei, my old friend and mentor, at once so cautious and generous in outlook, would no doubt be astonished—grateful but perhaps a little envious too, pleasantly surprised but also taken aback by the unself- conscious boldness of this new turn in theological inquiry.

Although my teachers might have been reluctant to admit as much, this shift from methodological to substantive preoccupations has surely been in part a response to, and general incorporation of, the lessons of liberation theologies. The Enlightenment challenge to the intellectual credibility of religious ideas can no longer be taken for

granted as the starting point for theological work now that theologians who face far more pressing worries than academic respectability have gained their voices, both here and around the globe. Theologians are now primarily called to provide not a theoretical argument for Christianity's plausibility, but an account of how Christianity can be part of the solution—rather than part of the problem—on matters that make a life-and-death difference to people, especially the poor and the oppressed.

Postmodern trends in the academy over the past quarter century have also encouraged this shift away from methodological preoccupations toward substantive theological judgments and their practical ramifications. The need to find theoretical justifications for the theological enterprise in particular has become less urgent given postmodern suspicions about all claims to universality, disinterestedness and culturally unmediated insight. Appeals to specifically Christian sources and norms of insight and the advocacy stance assumed by many theologians are less suspect than they used to be, now that the tradition-bound, culturally influenced and politically invested character of even the "hard sciences" has become an intellectual commonplace. Judgments in the natural and human sciences cannot be exempted from the scandal of particularity so often lodged against theology; any general outlook on the world and human life, whatever its basis and no matter how ambitious its scope, is shaped by contextually specific perspectives, topics of interest and normative orientations. The burden of proof that theology once assumed alone is lessened because every discipline finds itself in the same seemingly inescapable circumstance to some degree or other.

With the chastening of pretensions to universal and disinterested knowledge comes a renewed stress on the practical character of rational judgment, since all claims to knowledge now gain a topical and situation-specific focus. Critical assessment of a claim requires consideration of who makes the claim, in what context and for what purpose. In this academic climate, where a claim came from and the norms according to which it was generated are not as much at issue as critical assessment of the claim itself and what it has going for it. Even if sources and norms for theological proposals—such as faithfulness to scriptural witness—remain suspect in their particularity and relative immunity from criticism, thinkers believe that those proposals are saying something of wider moment about the world and our place in it, and as such are subject to challenge or support on a host of other grounds. Irrespective of their basis in sources and norms that Christians alone find credible, Christian recommendations for human life might well be plausible, aesthetically

pleasing, practical, satisfying of basic human needs, and so on.

The question of the legitimacy of theology shifts, in sum, from theology's ability to meet some scholarly minimum in procedure to the question of whether theology has anything important to say about the world and our place in it. How might a contemporary Christian theology promote (or not) a more adequate understanding of the world and a more just way of living? What resources, for example, does the Christian symbol system have for addressing the financial calamity and environmental degradation we must now all face up to, whether we like it or not? How would the Christian symbol system need to be creatively and critically recast in the process?

Answers to such questions require new method, and in this respect method retains its importance. Theology's closest analogue can no longer be a perennial philosophy, addressing the most general questions of human moment purportedly common to every time and place, but rather sociopolitical theory. In other words, the theologian—like a Weberian social scientist or a Gramscian political theorist—now asks about the various ways Christian beliefs and symbols can function in the particulars of people's lives so as to direct and provide support for the shape of social life and the course of social action. The theologian needs a thorough knowledge of the way these intersections of cultural meanings and sociopolitical formations have panned out across differences of time and place—a thorough knowledge of the various permutations of the Christian symbol system in all its complicated alignments with social forces, for good or ill. Such knowledge in hand, the constructive theologian is better positioned to intervene in the current situation adroitly, effectively and responsibly, with suggestions for both rethinking Christian claims and reconfiguring their import for human life.

My own theological trajectory has followed the general path just outlined in response to events of the times. I initially turned to theology from philosophy, which when I was an undergraduate at Yale involved (unusually for the time) the broad study of both continental and analytic philosophy and a familiarity with American pragmatism and process thought. The linguistic turn had been made, Thomas Kuhn had initiated a sociology of knowledge that chastened the objectivist ideal of science as a paradigm for all other disciplines, and deconstruction was in the air via the teaching of Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man and visiting lectures by Jacques Derrida; but the blurring of philosophy into anthropology and literary theory—now so common—had yet to take hold.

Theology held for me the prospect of addressing questions of meaning in a comprehensive fashion eschewed by most philosophers at the time. Theology as an academic discipline was clearly about something (not just talk about talk about talk), and its pursuit of the true and the right had significance for a community of inquiry outside itself—the church. Theology, in short, seemed to matter—to someone. Under the impact of postliberalism, which had begun to solidify around the work of Frei and Lindbeck, my work made that broader community of inquiry (which centrally involved religious people in their efforts to forge a way of life) its focus—as both subject matter and object for intervention—with a corresponding broadening of methods, away from philosophy as traditionally construed.

My first book, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (1988), was a wide-ranging analysis of patterns of discourse about God and creation in Christian thought. It discussed the way such patterns of discourse modified habits of speech in the wider society in order to show (rather than explain) the coherence of various Christian claims about God and the world; it also discussed how those patterns of discourse were distorted and coherence lost under modern strain. Because Christian language was never adequate to the God to which it referred, the theologian was concerned not directly with that referent, but with the habits of speech and action that amounted to God's direction of Christian lives. Intellectual difficulties arising out of everyday Christian practice—for example, the inability to resolve how I am to be responsible for the character of my life while dependent, nevertheless, on God's grace—set off theological questions about the compatibility of asserting both human and divine responsibility for our actions; and those questions were resolved by altering the way we usually speak of action in common.

In *The Politics of God* (1992), I more overtly discussed the function of religious discourse in Christian lives by exploring how beliefs about God and creation shaped Christians' political stances. Discourse analysis—the method of the first book—was insufficient here; the method was now something closer to that of sociology or anthropology. This book did not simply describe Christian practice (while commending it for its coherence, as the first book did). It argued a normative case—how beliefs about God and creation *should* shape Christian lives—in self-conscious opposition to the way those beliefs have commonly functioned to ill effect in the past and present.

In *Theories of Culture*: *A New Agenda for Theology* (1997), I raised up this new method as the primary subject for discussion, but only as a preparation for a more

constructive, substantive agenda. *Jesus*, *Humanity and the Trinity* (2001) ventured a clear vision of the whole “Christian thing” (as David Kelsey, another of my Yale teachers, would put it); all the main topics of Christian theology, such as the Trinity, creation, covenant, Christology and eschatology, were organized around the idea of God as gift giver, to establish a consistent Christian outlook on life and the corresponding character of human responsibilities.

Impelled by the horrendous events of 9/11 to address inequities on the global front, I developed the social principles garnered in that book from God’s giving to us—principles of unconditional, mutual and universally inclusive benefit—into an economic ethic, again with an innovative methodical twist, in a subsequent book, *Economy of Grace* (2005).

This last book brought together all the elements of the historical shift in theological sensibilities I have been discussing. The inequities of global capitalism was the specific challenge that called for a systematic rethinking of Christian themes and their implications for economic matters. Fundamental Christian beliefs, for example, have often been understood to concern a Christ who pays our debts and a God who demands repayment for goods received, parceling out just deserts to those meeting the requirements of further divine favor by their proper use of previous benefits. Rather than seeming to bring a debt economy to completion in this way, might not Christianity instead portend its end by talking about a God who in Christ extends unstinting favor to undeserving sinners, offering them all, however foreign or alienated from God’s household, the full inheritance of God’s own children? Rather than accepting the terms of economic life set by the wider society, Christianity, I argue, would thereby be engaging in a cultural contest with it over what the fundamental assumptions of economic life should be.

Arguing on Christian grounds for conclusions that I believe anyone might find attractive, I suggest substituting common enjoyment and use of goods for the assumed need for private property, and the ideal of a community of mutual fulfillment for a competitive winner-take-all society. I develop a method of comparative or general economy, which extends the insights of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to justify including in this way both theology and economics on equal terms.

Despite the idiosyncracies of my personal trajectory, this sort of constructive focus on Christianity as a worldview capable of orienting social action and this

investigation into the way such a focus requires conversation with social scientists are not especially unusual on the present scene. Liberation theologies, African-American, mujerista and white feminist theologies, historicist- and pragmatist-influenced theologies, and those creatively developing a Tillichian form of correlation—these are often found moving in the same direction. One thing that sets my own efforts apart is the place of historical study for creatively reworking Christian ideas and symbols to meet present challenges.

Relevant to this interest in history is the fact that part of what originally drew me to theology was its oddity within the secular university and even on the contemporary scene (despite the recent rise of fundamentalism as a world-historical force). Theology had the ability to propose the unexpected, to shock and startle. It offered an escape from the taken-for-granted certainties of life by referring them to something that remained ever beyond them, resisting capture and encapsulation. The theologian respects that capacity of theology, it seems to me, not by dressing up contemporary commonplaces in religious terms, but in seeking what lies beyond a contemporary outlook and beyond the immediate context of one’s work.

A theology that starts from, and uses as its toolbox for creative ends, materials gathered from the widest possible purview is, in my opinion, a theology with that imaginative expansiveness. Such a theology looks to the Christian past not for models for simple imitation but for a way to complicate one’s sense of the possibilities for present Christian expression and action. It looks to the past not to restrict and cramp what might be said in the present but to break out of the narrowness of a contemporary sense of the realistic. It complements an understanding of the complex variety of premodern theologies in the West with an understanding of the complex forms of Christianity’s global reach now and in the past. It moves beyond narrow denominational confines to the broadest possible ecumenical vision and sees beyond elite forms of theological expression, in written texts primarily, to the popular theologies of everyday life.

All that is what I mean by a historically funded constructive theology: the premodern, the popular, the global and the ecumenical are put to use to shake up, reorient and expand what one would have thought one could do with the Christian symbol system, in the effort to figure out what it is proper for Christians to think and do in today’s world.

The breadth of this understanding of the historical, and the focus here on the historical complexity and variability of Christian forms of life, indicate ways that I have moved beyond my Yale training. At Yale the talk was commonly of *the* biblical world and *the* Christian tradition. I have also refused to understand Christian ways of living in isolation from the wider culture. Christian ways of speaking and acting are not created out of whole cloth but are constituted by odd modifications to ways of speaking and acting that are current in the wider society. It is therefore impossible to understand their meaning and social point without understanding the culture of the wider society and what Christian habits of speech and action are saying about it through modifications made to it.

For example, when Christians call Jesus “Lord,” it is a comment on the lords of the wider society, a comment impossible to understand without knowing what is unusual about such an attribution in the context of its use. Contrary to its usual application, *lord* in Christian employment refers to a person shamefully crucified as a criminal and enemy of the state.

Similarly, the significance of eating in church is not clear until one understands the eating practices of the wider society. Modifications to those practices in church become a kind of critical commentary on social practices—for instance, a criticism of the exclusions of ordinary table fellowship.

Theological construction—figuring out what it is that Christians should say and do in the present context—therefore requires a highly complicated and subtle reading of the whole cultural field in which Christianity figures. One is helped here again by historical analysis (in my broad sense) that incorporates such a holistic cultural perspective. Theology is always a matter of judgments regarding the practices of the wider society and about the degree and manner in which they should also figure in Christian lives. Knowledge of how Christians have made such judgments at other times and places, and one’s own sense in hindsight or at a distance about whether they did so correctly (for example, in suitably Christian fashion), provide invaluable insights and practice in tackling the issues of one’s own time and circumstance when the personal stakes are much higher.

Method, I have learned, is no safeguard for making such judgment. Karl Barth was shocked by his teachers’ support for World War I into rejecting the method of Protestant liberalism. I was shocked by many of my American theological colleagues’ responses to the political upsurge of the Christian right in the U.S. and to the culture

wars during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which so shamefully targeted gays and lesbians at the height of the AIDS crisis, into seeing that method (as it has been traditionally conceived) is insufficient. Too many of my teachers (meaning those already established on the theologian scene and from whom I expected wisdom and guidance) interpreted the upsurge of the Christian right simply as the salutary entrance of religion into the public square, promising an elevation in the seriousness with which theological exchanges would have to be taken by the wider society. *What* was being promulgated by the Christian right was of less interest.

Dismay and shame at the fact that Christianity could stand so publicly for this was not, as far as I could see, at a premium. Given at least superficial similarities between the postliberalism of my immediate circle of teachers and that of the religious right (for example, preoccupation with the world of the Bible, repudiation of apologetics and opposition to liberal culture), the failure of postliberal theologians to criticize the religious right could easily be taken for an endorsement. To prevent silence from being taken for praise, the situation required, it seemed to me, only the most forceful repudiation of the Christian right's political judgments, something I tried to do in *The Politics of God*. The postliberal reluctance to be more than a witness to the wider society had to be overcome. It seemed to me, instead, that one's sense of that witness itself was to be formed in direct engagement with the political developments of the day. One should witness to a God who stood with those whom the Christian right maligned to further its own political interests—welfare mothers, sexual minorities and the urban poor, for example.

I carried away from this time the belief that it is misguided to think that proper theological method will make clear all by itself the proper Christian stance on the contested sociocultural issues of one's day. Search for proper method with that expectation encourages blanket judgments about the wider culture as a whole—it is to be resisted, or welcomed as the ground floor for the contributions of grace, or transformed as a whole—when what is really necessary is an often more difficult and nuanced discernment about particulars.

Advocating either the Word as norm for Christian judgment with Barth or critical correlation with Tillich does not help very much when the question is the contested one of how to read the situation in a Christian light in the first place. What, for example, does feminism or the movement for gay rights represent in Christian terms? An instance of moral irresponsibility, which Christians should resist, or a movement toward full human flourishing, to which Christians should be

sympathetic? Such judgments have much more to do with the substantive character of one's understanding of what Christianity is all about than they do with the method used to come up with that understanding.

To make the simplistic parallel with Barth again, Christians supported the Nazis not because they neglected the Word in favor of cultural trends but because they had a misguided understanding of Christianity. Hitler's National Socialism was wrong on Christian grounds because its material policy toward Jews (and others) was unchristian and not because it forced the neglect of the Word by making an idol of the nation-state. Clearly, if its understanding of Christianity seems to warrant it, a nation-state can, according to its own lights, be trying to respect the Word while persecuting Jews, and that fact would nevertheless merit as grave a theological condemnation as any the Barmen Declaration offers.

Christians are always influenced, one way or another, by the cultural trends of the day—respect for the Word does not exempt them from culture's effects (as Barth himself recognized in *Church Dogmatics* 1/2). It is what Christians do with these cultural influences that matters, as they grow into an understanding of their Christian commitments by way of complex processes of revision, appropriation and resistance to them, taken one by one. One never rejects everything, since one's Christianity always remains parasitic to some extent on the wider society's forms of life. Nor (one hopes) does one accept everything, because Christian justifications even for courses of action shared with the wider society alter their sense and point.

One's judgments about different aspects of the wider society's practices need not, moreover, be uniform. For example, my grave worries about economic inequalities that are the product of global capitalism need not deny the greater economic opportunities for women that are also a feature of economic developments in the modern West. An equal resistance to both simply because they are the "world" that Christianity is to reject leads to dishonesty about the way that the world inevitably figures in even the best Christian lives and to a lazy reneging on Christian responsibilities to judge particulars with care.

Theologians need to be honest about the complexities of Christian lives and the way Christian beliefs and symbols figure there. Doing so means taking seriously what disciplines such as sociology and anthropology reveal: the often messy, ambiguous and porous character of the effort to live Christianly. Trained historians of Christianity—particularly historians who avail themselves of the insights of those

other disciplines—are not surprised by such a recommendation. Most theologians, I believe, have yet to see its force.

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