

BOOK REVIEWS

THE GRAMMAR OF FAITH, Paul Holmer; New York: Harper & Row, 1978; 212 pages; \$10.00.

The present theological scene in North America is perplexing. In the past, theological controversies were central features and crucial episodes in our culture. Presently, such controversies and debates continue, but they take place in ghetto-like atmospheres, insulated from the circumstances and problems of the believing laity and isolated from unbelieving men and women of letters. This situation tends to render vital theological discussions innocuous and irrelevant to general intelligent audiences. And, often, the response of theologians is only to intensify such discussions among themselves. As with other disciplines in the humanities, especially philosophy and literary criticism, professionalization and specialization seem to have significantly sapped theology's quest for wisdom, its involvement and engagement in the general intellectual and political life of our nation.

There are four major paradigms in North American theology today. And, to my dismay, all four seem to confirm my observations. The first paradigm, dominant years ago and still persisting, derives from H. Richard Niebuhr's powerful dissertation on Troeltch's philosophy of religion. I shall call it the *historicized Kantian paradigm*. It confronts the most important philosophical issue in contemporary theology—the encounter of history with necessary and universal faith-claims, and the ensuing debate between historicists and transcendentalists. The major proponents in our generation have been Gordon Kaufmann and his younger, unorthodox students such as George Rupp and Wayne Proudfoot. This paradigm thrives on dialogue with academic philosophers who are disenchanted with the ahistorical character of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Its method ranges from appropriating the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin to rendering the insights of Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell relevant to contemporary theology.

The chief shortcoming of this paradigm is inseparable from the nature of the philosophical issue it addresses. The history/faith or historicist/transcendentalist controversy is a perennial one and quite possibly an insoluble one. It is not merely a philosophical problem, but, more importantly, a clash of cultural descriptions of what it is to be human. By focusing primarily on the philosophical aspects of this problem rather than the internal dynamics of these clashing cultural descriptions, this paradigm tends to spin its wheels while traveling little distance, and subsequently to hold the broader theological, cultural and political issues of the day at arm's length.

The second major paradigm—the *process paradigm*—rests upon the works of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. It is the most vital paradigm on the academic theological scene today. Its proponents are the most enthusiastic theologians in the academy. It has enlisted in its ranks the most talented cluster of academic theologians, including such figures as Schubert Ogden, John Cobb, Langdon Gilkey and gifted younger

thinkers such as David Griffin, and (with qualifications) Robert Neville and David Tracy. Despite periodic adverse publicity and frequent sneering remarks by mainstream theologians, process theologians are extremely serious thinkers engaged in a philosophical and theological revision of the Christian tradition. Unlike proponents of the first paradigm, process theologians have been unable to create and sustain any meaningful and longstanding dialogue with academic philosophers. The anti-metaphysical disposition, and specifically an indifference to Whiteheadian metaphysics, of academic philosophers has prevented such a dialogue. This situation has contributed to the undoing of process theologians insofar as it has ensured their isolation. Armed with an alien philosophical vocabulary, and a novel and unique theological worldview and crippled by an embarrassing silence on ethics and politics, the process paradigm remains the possession of Christian academicians who are marginal to the nontheological academy, Christian laity and the general intelligent audience in the country.

The profound and often obscure philosophical writings of Husserl and Heidegger undergird the third major paradigm—the *hermeneutical paradigm*. Giant theological figures of the past generation, such as Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, and more recent thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gerhard Ebeling, have enriched this paradigm. Aside from its prevailing presence in New Testament studies, this paradigm has been kept alive by the provocative and prolific work of Paul Ricoeur. The influence of Ricoeur on North American theologians has been immense, yet, it has always been unclear to me what this influence has actually amounted to, or what it has concretely yielded or produced. It surely informs the sophisticated theological formulations and illuminating literary insights of Nathan Scott; it also plays a crucial role in the promising eclectic theology of David Tracy, but this paradigm seems more and more to be the possession of Ricoeur. It is uncertain whether there will emerge any group of creative theological disciples to sustain it.

The last paradigm I will consider is the *liberation paradigm*. The proponents of this paradigm tend to be vehement, often vociferous, social critics who invoke Christian themes of justice and liberation to complacent, conforming Christians. The initiator of this paradigm was James Cone, who focused on the most visible and vicious form of oppression in North America—namely, racism. This paradigm differs fundamentally from the others in two ways. First, despite its similarity to the social gospel, it became a serious theological alternative in our own time (in the late sixties and early seventies). Second, it was initiated by a member of one of the most oppressed and exploited groups in North America, namely James Cone, a black American.

With the help of Latin American liberation theologians, this paradigm has now become the heartthrob of left-liberal Christians, with feminist, native American, Hispanic and gay variations on the liberation theme. This paradigm confronts theologically the most important ethical and political issues in post-industrial North America—those of class, racial and sexual exploitation and oppression, and the maldistribution of wealth.

The major limitation of this paradigm is that although it is more successful than the others in this regard, it remains primarily an academic affair, with little penetration into local congregations. Secondly, it has not been able persuasively to distinguish its voice, message and aims from left-liberal, non-Christian voices. Hence it risks being relevant to the most crucial ethical and political issues of the day while losing its distinctively Christian character and content. This paradigm raises the crucial question as to whether being engaged as Christians in the central controversies and issues of our day renders one's

Christian identity superfluous.

Enter Paul Holmer. Holmer's new book, *The Grammar of Faith*, is best understood against a scenario of the present theological scene. I have just sketched a crude scheme in order to situate his work historically. Let it first be said that it is a wise book, an unpretentious book, free of theological jargon. It is informed by an academic concern for subtlety, and yet it is not directed toward academic theologians. It is written primarily for Christian laity. It possesses a personal tone without degenerating into fashionable self-indulgence. It shows the Christian lay reader why and how academic theologians have failed to keep the faith alive.

And why have academic theologians failed to keep the faith alive? Precisely because they have been so obsessed with keeping the faith alive, and hence have looked in places—philosophy, metaphysics, science, politics—which end by deadening this faith. Holmer is a traditional evangelist. But what makes him so interesting are the radical metaphysical and metatheological moves he employs to justify his traditional evangelism.

Holmer is an important theologian because his viewpoint represents a nascent and emerging fifth paradigm, a *Wittgensteinian-Kierkegaardian paradigm*, which links radical efforts to overcome academic philosophy and theology with attempts to lay bare the structure, content and vitality of the life and language of the faithful. He is one of the few theologians in the academy, along with Geoffrey Wainwright, James Cone and a few others, who take seriously the common activities and practices of Christian lay people. He also is one of the few philosophers in Christian seminaries to offer a highly plausible philosophical position which puts these activities and practices at the center of theological reflection.

Holmer's metaphysical thesis is that theology ought to be a *part of* the language of the faithful, not *about* this language. Theology has a participatory dimension which precludes objective, disinterested attempts to "ground" the language of the faithful in some ontology, metaphysics or upon some set of "undeniable facts." "Theology must always move towards a present-tense first-person mood" (p. 24). Theology should be done in an "of" mood rather than an "about" mood. Theology sets forth the structure of Christian faith or the rules and grammar of the life and language of the faithful with "the form of personal appropriation built in" (p. 25).

Holmer's conception of theology breaks down the modern academic distinctions between theology and preaching, and between theory and practice. Theology becomes, as Kierkegaard conceived it, concerned first and foremost—in form and content—with the quality of one's life and the quality of the message thereby communicated. Holmer states,

The thesis of these pages is that when Christianity is made into something primarily theological and doctrinal, then the nature of faith becomes malformed, as if it were chiefly an act of belief in the doctrine. Subsequently, every person would then be required to understand the theology, and the gist of being a Christian would be a matter of comprehension, just as one might say that being a geologist is a matter of ever deepening and broadening the intellectual grasp. (p. 185)

Theology becomes a form of preaching in that it reveals what the faith is about by disclosing the emptiness of fashionable theological forms of bad faith. Theology tries "to intensify and purify religious passion" (p. 67), and "to root believers firmly in the Christian life" (p. 50). Like preaching, theology has an evangelical aim: to discover,

encourage, promote, cultivate and refine Christian virtues, values, sensibilities and capacities. Holmer asks seriously, "For what else is good preaching but vernacular theology?" (p. 14) and notes that "the positive projection of real preaching becomes theology in action" (p. 27). He is neither reducing theology to mere didactic preaching nor elevating preaching to propagandistic theology. Rather he is highlighting their common aim—to convert and sustain souls for Christ—and accenting the subtle ways in which both participate in the language of the faithful.

Holmer also is concerned with breaking down the distinction between theory and practice in the life and work of theologians. For him, theology, like the Christian life for all believers, is not a profession but a vocation, not specialized teaching but life activity. It is a risky affair, not because its subject matter is often hard to get a hold on but because it calls one's own life continually into question. Theologizing, like preaching, singing and praying, is a Christian practice which contributes to one's self-development and self-formation in the faith. It is the broadening of the lens, derived from the Scripture and tradition, through which one views oneself in order to become a fuller and more faithful self in Christ.

Holmer's conception of theology presupposes controversial philosophical views on truth, objectivity, rationality and validity of which he is well aware. His discussion contains the traditional philosophical debates about realism vs. idealism, correspondence vs. coherence theories of truth, univocal vs. equivocal (or "polymorphic") rationality, universal vs. contextual validity. It is at this point that we see clearly Holmer's radical Wittgensteinian viewpoint. He undercuts the realist/idealist debate by revealing how both are sides of the same coin; both are tied to the quest for foundations. Only by checking this quest, this urge for grounding beliefs in some ontology, metaphysics or set of scientific "facts" do we come to see that the Christian beliefs we hold are never based on privileged foundations but rather are incomplete descriptions of ourselves, the world and God we adopt, accept and adjust to:

The overwhelming point to remember, which lays to rest the ghost of those peculiar philosophical longings that grip us ever and anon, is that there is no indisputable, no indubitable starting point—no fact—for any and all inquirers. (p. 106)

Holmer deals with the traditional debates about truth, objectivity, rationality and validity by contextualizing these notions. Like a good Wittgensteinian, he refuses to grant them a factual or transcendental foundation which is free of an interest-laden description or theory. In the most revealing philosophical paragraph in the book, he answers the Platonists, Cartesians or Kantians who would insist upon context-free conceptions of knowledge, truth, objectivity, rationality and validity:

What I have said about the word *knowledge*—namely, that it is context-determined and hence is used for a variety of conceptual purposes—must also be said about *objective*, *true*, and even *real*. Thus, when someone says: "What I want to know is whether theology is 'objective' and not just a party line," the question does not permit the plain and unequivocal answer that is often being sought. The better part of wisdom is not to answer the question directly; for either *yes* or *no* tends to buttress the vulgar academic prejudice that lurks in the question. A prejudice is, among other things, an idea about which one refuses to think. And it is an academic and hence a confoundedly difficult prejudice to eradicate—namely, that *objective*, *real*, *true*, *logical*, *rational*, and other words of this extensive criteriological sort are manifest in meaning, unvariegated in use, simple to understand,

and plainly rudimentary and underived in import. Though we use them in every context, and though we all are endowed with sufficient capacity to use some of them in telling ways, they are still not transcendentals and context-free. The fact is that they are used in several contexts, and they become context-dependent. So we have to be clear about the specifics in each case. *Rational, objective, true, real*, etc. are always "in respect to so and so"; and then the expressions make sense and engage a subject matter and a thinker. (pp. 189-190)

This viewpoint raises unsurprising accusations of relativism, skepticism, even "closet" nihilism. Is not contextualism a form of relativism? If truth is contextual how do we know what really *is*? If rationality is polymorphic how do we know what we really ought to believe? If validity depends on a context, how do we know what we really ought to accept? Holmer's Wittgensteinian aim is to rid us of this "really-disease" and force us to face the topsy-turvy world as mortals rather than as gods, and to look at the world from the viewpoint of fallen, limited, finite, and sinful human beings rather than *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Yet despite my agreement with Holmer's philosophical Wittgensteinian position to support his theological Kierkegaardian views, I believe he is neither Wittgensteinian nor Kierkegaardian enough. He is not Wittgensteinian enough because he tends to freeze the rules and grammar of the life and language of the faithful. For Wittgenstein, the dynamic rules and grammar of language replace static Platonic forms, Aristotelian essences, Cartesian egos and Kantian categories. Holmer often seems to talk about the rules and grammar of the language of the faithful as if they are stationary, as if they were not part of the flux of human history. For instance, he writes,

. . . I want to stress that fact that not all concepts wane and wax, live and die, so that we cannot say blandly about them, as a class, that they are all historical. That theory is wrong. That generalization is too sweeping and stifles our sensing many differences. Most of the concepts that inform our esthetic, moral, and religious concerns have a striking nonhistorical character about them. . . .

By the term *nonhistorical*, I do not suggest anything ethereal or otherworldly. Rather, I am only drawing attention to the fact that the concept does not need any particular historical surrounding in order for it to acquire vitality. All or any historical settings are sufficient. (p. 150)

For Holmer, concepts like "I" and "God" are nonhistorical, which can only mean that they are ultimately context-free. If this is so, he seems to retreat from his radical Wittgensteinian view. Since the rules and grammar of the language of the faithful are seen as human activities and social practices, he remains within the Wittgensteinian camp. But he is no longer a radical Wittgensteinian because of his tendency to downplay the dynamism of these activities and practices.

Holmer is not Kierkegaardian enough because he puts too little emphasis on the radical character of the existential risk and uncertainty attached to the perennial process of becoming a Christian. He is aware of this character, but it does not seem to be an integral element in his view of Christian living. We find little talk about the leap of faith or the tortuous move from abstract possibility to concrete actuality which is required by Christian faith. It is plausible that his tendency to freeze the rules and grammar of the life and language of the faithful leads him to downplay the risk and uncertainty in life and language. In this way, his conservative readings of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard complement

one another.

Holmer's refusal to be Wittgensteinian or Kierkegaardian enough is inextricably linked to his attitude toward tradition in Christian thinking and living. He has a Burkean view of tradition. For him, the Christian tradition is organic, "rich, many-sided," and requires little change. If there are to be any changes, they should be slight, "sheer increments." He appears to experience little anxiety in referring constantly to "the faithful," "the Christian scripture," and "the liturgy." In short, "the tradition" is more easily identifiable for him than for many of us.

I am not suggesting that Holmer ought to be a Jacobin about tradition and discard it. In a sense, all good Wittgensteinians are Burkeans on tradition. Yet, what most Burkeans often overlook is that some aspects of the tradition may promote and encourage radical changes of the tradition in order to preserve the tradition. The Burkean insight, the inescapable need for tradition, doesn't necessarily lead to Burkean ideology, the view that any changes of the tradition must be slow and gradual.

This brings me to a general point about Holmer's illuminating and fascinating book. It bears the stamp of ideological innocence. He acknowledges the polemical aim of the book—to counter the ideological character and academic isolation of contemporary theology—and then he quips, "True, there is no ideology here" (p. xi). And it is true that there is no moral didacticism or political propaganda in the book. But despite all his Wittgensteinian sophistication, he still assumes the possibility of a face-to-face encounter with the Christian scriptures and tradition which is unencumbered by our fallenness, our sinfulness, and our ideological biases and prejudices. It is one thing to criticize convoluted theological attempts to show what the biblical texts express or stand for, but it is another thing to suggest that we can understand the texts unmediated by some interpretation. And, indeed, every interpretation and counter-interpretation contains the indelible imprint of our fallenness. In a revealing passage, Holmer writes,

Of course, when we speak with emotion, we are not doing science or writing treatises. But we do often understand ourselves and others in such crisis situations. It is the plain task of theology, whatever its point of departure, be it a glorious and extravagantly endowed genius of the past or a school of thought that sweeps all opposition before it, to move towards such simplicity. (p. 16)

One may partly endorse this task of theology, but it seems false to say that when we speak with emotion we often understand others, because it is in precisely such situations that disagreement, and often disagreement based on misunderstanding, prevails. Holmer's statement rings true only in those situations in which there has been close personal contact, or when a group is culturally homogeneous or held together by bonds of trust—in short, in those situations in which an organic, cohesive tradition exists. Within such a tradition, general consensus on interpretations of the scripture, liturgy, etc., makes it look as if a face-to-face encounter with the Christian tradition is occurring. Only then does the show of emotion prompt empathy and understanding. But it is precisely these kinds of situations and this ideal of tradition which are being called into question by the realities facing our churches, our seminaries, our communities, our society, our world.

Holmer has performed an invaluable service by presenting and promoting a new and exciting viewpoint—the Wittgensteinian-Kierkegaardian paradigm—on the North American theological scene. It is the most noteworthy viewpoint I know that begins and ends with the laity without surrendering intellectual rigor. Yet, such a viewpoint must be more radi-

cally Wittgensteinian, more radically Kierkegaardian, and more open to change and innovation of the tradition—especially its ethical and political practices—if it is to more fully disclose “the grammar of Christian faith” in our troubled times.

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THE SHROUD OF TURIN: BURIAL CLOTH OF JESUS CHRIST?, Ian Wilson; Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday and Co., 1978; 272 pages; \$10.00. Image paperback edition, 1979; \$3.95.

The thrust of this book and of many current investigations of the shroud is to prove that the “Holy Shroud,” still preserved today in the Cathedral of St. John Baptist in Turin, Italy, over the high altar of the Royal Chapel of the dukes of Savoy (the former rulers of Italy), is none other than the very linen cloth in which Jesus Christ himself was wrapped in the tomb and upon which has been imprinted—somehow—a picture of Jesus Christ at the moment of his transition from death to resurrection. But is this true? *Can* it be “proven”?

Scientific, biblical, historical, theological, artistic, and even existential factors are involved, but let us first proceed to a factual description of the shroud. It is fourteen feet, three inches long by three feet, seven inches wide, and carries a faint imprint of the front and back of a powerfully built man with beard and long hair, who was approximately five feet, eleven inches in height, between the age of 30 and 45, characteristically Semitic in appearance, and placed in the attitude of death, with hands crossed over the loins. The eyes seem to have been closed with coins over them, a not uncommon Jewish burial practice of the time, and a recent study of the markings on them has even suggested that the coin over the right eye can be identified with a particular coin minted only during the tenure of Pilate. The image has been formed as though the body were first laid with the feet at one end of the cloth and the head towards the middle, with the remaining half then drawn lengthwise over the head and down to the feet again. Medical comparisons indicate that this is the image of a body that has suffered death by crucifixion, and at least some New Testament scholars (such as J. A. T. Robinson) now believe that evidence of wounds upon the body is generally compatible with what is known from Holy Scripture and otherwise of the wounds of Jesus Christ. The triangular patches upon the cloth, so prominent in every photograph, have nothing to do with the actual image but are rather the attempts to repair damages (including scorches and water-stains) caused by a fire in 1532.

In addition to the obvious fact that none of the gospels mention any such burial cloth imprinted with Jesus’s image, there are at least three features of this shroud that are rather unexpected. The nail prints, in contrast to the artistic or iconographic tradition of Jesus’s crucifixion, appear to have pierced the wrists of this man rather than the palms of his hands. Since the turn of the present century, however, this has often been regarded as the more probable manner of crucifixion, and this probability has received some confirmation from the discovery in 1968 of a victim of crucifixion from the New Testament also showing nails to have gone through the wrists. Another unexpected feature of the