

CHAPTER XI  
APPLICATION AND THE DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN ACTIVE AND OBJECTIVE TRADITION

The distinction between active and objective tradition arose, we saw, in the effort to describe the role of the ecclesiastical magisterium in the transmission of Christian truth. Cardinal Franzelin had argued that in order to define tradition, as that object which has been passed down, one must necessarily refer to the mode of transmission. The primary mode, in his opinion, is the magisterium. And while Franzelin was willing to concede that the doctrines of Christian faith are revealed in utterances and life of the entire Church, only the magisterium expounds the doctrines with authority. Its exposition is authoritative because the magisterium represents the spiritual link between the present and the time of Jesus Christ, who urged the apostles to make all nations his disciples (Mt. 28.19). Through them the truths of the gospel were conceptually elaborated in such a way that Franzelin could regard tradition as doctrine. Through it the objective matter of the gospel assumed its active form as Christian tradition.<sup>1</sup>

The advantage of Franzelin's outline of the distinction between active and objective tradition lies in what we have called its epistemological realism. Franzelin and his school recognized that, if one wants to pass on a tradition, the tradition must be known and applied. In order to facilitate that knowledge, Christian tradition was defined in terms of doctrines. The doctrines had emerged through the magisterial application of Christian principles to problems which had arisen throughout the centuries. Some of Franzelin's successors, notably Cardinal Billot, even went so far as to assert that, apart from the magisterium, one cannot say what tradition – i.e., Christian doctrine- really is.<sup>2</sup> Although this view could not claim the authority of Franzelin, and receives little attention today, it does point to a genuine insight. It suggests that the truth of Christianity cannot be known apart from the interpretations of those who hold it to be true. One cannot speak of the object of tradition without reference to those for whom it is actively an object.

Yet the distinction between active and objective tradition poses problems which began to arise even at the time when the distinction was widely used. Some of these problems have to do with the "regula fidei" or rule of faith, defined as the truth of the Church's teaching of the gospel. It is a distinctive feature of the ancient belief about the rule of faith that the rule measures what Christians believe, and is identical to that belief.<sup>3</sup> In short, there is no criterion of the truth distinct from the truth itself. When theologians

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<sup>1</sup> See the section above entitled A Reconsideration of the Modern Theology of Tradition, esp. the sections entitled "Active Tradition: The Formal Element," and "Problems Posed by Scholastic Terminology."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., esp. the section entitled "Billot's Denial that Objective Tradition is Part of the Rule."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., esp. the section entitled "The Remote and Proximate Rules of Faith."

introduced the rule of faith into their discussions of tradition, a distinction became necessary between the remote and proximate aspects of the rule. Franzelin, for example, taught that the remote rule of faith referred to objective tradition, and that the proximate rule of faith referred to active tradition, the teaching of the magisterium.<sup>4</sup> He therefore introduced a criterion of truth, the magisterium, distinct from the truth itself.

While it must be said that Franzelin concedes the existence of Christian truths which have not always and everywhere been taught by the magisterium – a concession which some theologians of tradition have not been willing to make – nevertheless the application to tradition of the belief about the rule of faith created problems. It tended to undervalue the role as bearers of tradition played by those who are not part of the magisterium. And it tended to suggest that, if the magisterium is not currently teaching a doctrine, the doctrine cannot be part of tradition. In sum, the introduction of a criterion into the teaching about the rule of faith and about tradition focused attention on the limited ability of finite humanity to express the entirety of Christian truth.

The various problems of the relation between the tradition and the bearers of it can be seen as part of a general philosophical problem, the problem of the whole and its parts. This problem has been given a historical turn in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and in the thinkers, above all in Hegel and Heidegger, to whom Gadamer most frequently alludes. Hegel and Heidegger contribute to the problem an analysis of how anything partial can adequately express or encompass a whole. Gadamer investigates the converse question, namely, how the whole can be expressed in its parts. These questions become relevant to the theology which is our theme when we reflect on the relation between active and objective tradition. How do the many acts of transmission comprise an objective and integral unity, Christian tradition? How does the unified object, tradition, reveal itself in a number of diverse actions? How, in short, can finite and historical human beings claim to speak authoritatively of an event and its consequences which, by definition, have supra-historical significance?

#### XI.1. The Adequacy of the Expressions of Tradition

The contribution of Hegel and Heidegger to this question has been well-formulated by the Lutheran theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg (b. 1928). Pannenberg is not expressly concerned with the distinction in Catholic theology between active and objective tradition. His theological interest revolves around history and its relation to faith. But Pannenberg appropriates the philosophic rehabilitation of tradition, or at least the philosophic emphasis on the historicity of understanding, in a way which illuminates the theology of Catholics as well as of Protestants. His essay of 1964, "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutic," advances the thesis that both historians and theologians are oriented toward a conception of universal history. He begins by raising the hypothetical objection that theology differs from history in that the truth of theological assertions can only be measured against a universal-historical perspective: the perspective of "the end of time" or of God. Pannenberg counters this objection by

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., esp. the section entitled "Franzelin's Insistence on the Independence of the Remote Rule."

asserting that all historical disciplines, and not just theology, involve a universal perspective. Historians as well as theologians acknowledge that the true meaning of an event within history only emerges in a final way against the backdrop of the whole of history.

From this Pannenberg infers that the investigation of the event of Jesus Christ cannot in principle belong outside the realm of historical research. “If historical research really inquires into the individuality of a historical person in a comprehensive manner,” Pannenberg writes, “then what theology has found in Jesus of Nazareth cannot in principle transgress the boundaries of historical inquiry – or else theology is not rendering a true account in its explication of the inherent meaning of the historical figure of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> Pannenberg’s leading idea, that theology is nothing other than an account of what is inherent in the historical testimony to Jesus, finds support in Hegel. The Hegelian doctrine of the unity of being and thought is taken by Pannenberg to imply that no special realm of being exists, accessible to supernatural theology, from which historical thought is excluded. To be sure, Pannenberg does not do full justice here to the traditional subordination within theology of understanding to faith. Theology is not a historical investigation of Jesus of Nazareth which culminates in faith, but a faith which seeks to understand itself.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Pannenberg is right to stress that Christian dogma has its basis in a historical revelation. Theology is history insofar as the theologian looks to history for deeper insight into the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Pannenberg freely concedes that the speculations of theology are anticipatory in nature, and that their final truth is the subject matter of eschatology. But to conclude from this, he says, that theological doctrines are untrue would be to succumb to what Hegel called the “*unglückliches Bewusstsein*” or unhappy consciousness. This is the consciousness which looks upon itself skeptically as cut off from truth, and which at the same time regards this skepticism as genuinely true.<sup>7</sup> Such a consciousness suffers

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<sup>5</sup> “Wenn historische Forschung die Individualität einer historischen Persönlichkeit wirklich umfassend erfragt, dann kann das, was die Theologie an Jesus von Nazareth findet, nicht prinzipiell den Umkreis historischer Frage überschreiten – oder es handelte sich in der Theologie nicht wahrhaft um Explikation der der historischen Gestalt Jesu von Nazareth eigenen Bedeutung.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Über historische und theologische Hermeneutik,” in Pannenberg, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967), 1.140. Translation: “On Historical and Theological Hermeneutic,” in Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays*, trans. George H. Kehm, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970-1971), 1.160.

<sup>6</sup> This criticism of Pannenberg is linked to his emphasis on the interpretation of propositional statements as the model for hermeneutics, in contrast to Gadamer’s emphasis on the model of conversation. See Chapter XIII below, esp. the section “Irreverence to the Assertion?”

<sup>7</sup> See Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke*, 2.166-181; Baillie translation, pp. 251-267.

despair over the seeming impossibility of gauging the historical import of Jesus of Nazareth, given the fact that the whole of history is a conception denied to finite humanity. A final estimate of the meaning of Jesus would have to be treated with skepticism by the unhappy consciousness. Pannenberg, alluding to Hegel, rejects this skepticism. He argues that, despite the contingent nature of thought, there is no a priori reason why the human thought of the whole of history should not agree with the being of the whole, at least in the form of an anticipation of full agreement.<sup>8</sup> Hence an evaluation of the historical significance of Jesus, based on an anticipation of universal history, is permissible. The limits of the human understanding of universal history – we would say the finitude of the separate acts by which the whole of objective tradition is passed on – do not invalidate that understanding.

#### XI.1.A. The Anticipatory Nature of Understanding

If it could be said that human finitude invalidates historical understanding, it might be argued that all understanding is relative because no human beings are eternal and omniscient. Even the verified experimental knowledge of the natural scientist possesses only a truth contingent upon the knowledge of the whole of nature. As for theological assertions, it could be said, they are much less precise than physics or chemistry. But here the Heideggerian exposition of the anticipatory nature of all human understanding makes its contribution. Heidegger's analysis of understanding and interpretation includes the insight that, whenever we thematize the meaning of anything, that thematization is based upon a preliminary grasp which never fully comes to light. Whatever meaning something may have, whether in history or the natural sciences, it is a meaning within a context which is not itself thematized.<sup>9</sup> One cannot await the full emergence into clarity of all things. On the contrary, one finds oneself in an investigative situation within which the interpretive variables are never completely present at hand, for destiny grants only a limited number of possibilities. This is most apparent, Heidegger argues, when the self, the authentic being of the human person, is the object of investigation. For what is most authentic can only be chosen by means of an anticipatory grasp of the entirety of one's life. Heidegger derives from this the attitude of "vorlaufende Entschlossenheit" or anticipatory resoluteness. One becomes resolved in anticipation of one's death.<sup>10</sup>

Pannenberg finds Heidegger's analysis useful for characterizing the anticipation of the entirety of history within which a particular historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth, attains his true meaning. The Heideggerian concept of anticipation enables an understanding of the whole of life whose moments must be met resolutely. In Pannenberg's view, it reveals the primacy of the future for historical interpretation.<sup>11</sup> To

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<sup>8</sup> Pannenberg, *Grundfragen*, 1.147; tran., 1.169.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>11</sup> Pannenberg, *Grundfragen*, 1.146; trans., 1.167.

be sure, Pannenberg prefers to sever the concept of anticipation from Heidegger's standpoint of death. It is not the moment of death in which the particulars of one's historical existence attain their full significance, Pannenberg implies, but the end of time, an eschatological future which lies beyond death. To this extent, Heidegger's concept calls for refinement. And Pannenberg himself is not without problems. We would want to question whether the anticipation of the future can ever really be, as Pannenberg suggests, conscious of itself as a mere anticipation.<sup>12</sup> Were this the case, it might imply that one can stand outside one's beliefs and regard them from a neutral standpoint. Such a standpoint, we would say, is not accessible. Nevertheless, the Heideggerian doctrine of anticipation does offer Pannenberg a way of clarifying both the theologian's and the historian's employment of universal-historical concepts. By means of an anticipatory grasp of the whole of history – whether inferred from the sum of past events, as for the historian, or from the Christian expectation of a divinely-mandated conclusion to the temporal order – the events within history are interpreted. Such an anticipatory understanding does justice, in Pannenberg's eyes, both to the finitude of human thought and to the presence of the whole of history which arises in our meditation on its end.

#### XI.1.B. Pannenberg's Rehabilitation of Tradition in General

This train of thought leads the Protestant, Pannenberg, to his own rehabilitation of Christian tradition. He begins by distancing himself from Hegel. Hegel's critique of Kant and the analysis of the unhappy consciousness rightly suggest, in Pannenberg's view, that human thought, no matter how partial its conceptions, corresponds so intimately to being that it constantly outstrips its inadequate conceptions. But Hegel concluded from this insight that philosophy must transcend the religious thought from which it arises, and so must transcend the opposition between the here and the beyond.<sup>13</sup> Against this, Pannenberg raises an objection in the name of the anticipatory thinking derived from Heidegger. All thought, in Heidegger's view, is a projection of possibilities for the future which destiny grants. What we anticipate is never simply future, for we conceive it in the present. In that sense, the future is already here, a projection for which the past has laid the groundwork. This projection, which in Hegel's view must transcend its religious presuppositions, cannot transcend them, Pannenberg argues, for the projected future is the truth of those presuppositions. The Lutheran theologian expresses the point in this way:

[R]eflectively liberated critical thought will not succeed in surpassing its own religiously grounded tradition, to which it is related critically, at the point in the process of criticism at which the absent truth to which thought reaches out in foreconception is shown to be the genuine truth of the tradition itself. In this case,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1.149; trans., 1.171.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Phänomologie*, in *Werke*, 2.582; trans., pp. 763-764.

the critical process surpasses only the previous *interpretation* of the content of the tradition, and does so precisely by releasing its deeper truth.<sup>14</sup>

Pannenberg distinguishes here between the Christian tradition and the forms in which it has been passed down, i.e., the interpretations of the tradition. He means that the criticism of the tradition, far from transcending it in Hegelian fashion, is instead the uncovering of its truth.<sup>15</sup> This insight accords in a remarkable way with the Catholic idea of absolute dogmatic truth expressed in a variety of contingent forms. Although Pannenberg has, in other writings, obscured the relation between Christian tradition and its dogmatic interpretation,<sup>16</sup> nevertheless his present formula has an undeniable force. It suggests that, however partial the interpretations of tradition, the tradition itself is not exhausted. Indeed, we would go further than Pannenberg: not only is the tradition itself unsurpassed, but its expressions remain binding at least in that, without them, we would not know what Christian tradition is.

Hegel and Heidegger illuminate the distinction between active and objective tradition, it can now be said, in their treatment of the partial nature of expression. To those who would complain that the act by which tradition is passed on cannot adequately express its object, Hegel would reply that the limits of expression do not detract from the truth expressed. Instead, the recognition of those limits is already the transcending of

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<sup>14</sup> “Dagegen [gegen dem mythischen Denken] wird das durch Reflexion sich befreiende kritische Denken über seine eigene, religiös begründete Tradition, auf die es sich kritisch bezieht, dort nicht hinausgelangen, wo die unvorhandene Wahrheit, auf die das Denken vorgreift, sich im Prozess der Kritik als die eigentliche Wahrheit am Überlieferten selbst herausstellt, so dass der kritische Prozess nur die bisherige *Auslegung* des Überlieferten überholt und gerade dadurch seine tiefere Wahrheit freilegt.” Pannenberg, *Grundfragen*, 1.152; trans., 1.175. The English translation, which renders Pannenberg’s one sentence as two, misses the causal connection of the “so dass.” Thought does not surpass tradition, but only the previous interpretation of it.

<sup>15</sup> The Catholic, René Marlé, approves Pannenberg’s thesis that the interpretation of Scripture always occurs within the wider reality of history. Marlé’s treatment is found only in the English edition of his *Le problème théologique de l’herméneutique. Les grands axes de la recherche contemporaine* (Paris: Éditions de l’Orante, 1963). The French edition does not include any reference to Pannenberg. See Marlé, *Introduction to Hermeneutics*, trans. E. Froment and R. Albrecht (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), pp. 92-93.

<sup>16</sup> See Pannenberg’s essay of 1970, “Die Bedeutung des Christentums in der Philosophie Hegels,” in which the traditional dogmatic form of Christian tradition, instead of being regarded as the expression through which the force of tradition manifests itself, is taken to be a narrow restriction. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972), pp. 112-113; translation: *The Idea of God and Human Freedom*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), p. 177.

them. And to those who would lament the contingency of the acts by which objective tradition is known, Heidegger would insist that those acts reveal the destiny according to which the object unfolds itself. Such a destiny can be known only in anticipation, but it can be known. Hence we may assert that, while objective tradition is only partially expressed in the activity of transmission, still that tradition would not be known at all apart from that activity. Furthermore, in active tradition (defined as the interpretive application of objective tradition to the present) the object becomes truly itself: not a static doctrine, but a transmission from – and hence a continuation of – the past. Gadamer elaborates this point in his doctrine of application.

### XI.2. False Inferences and Juridical Preoccupations

The Gadamerian doctrine of application, we have seen, states a twofold thesis. It means, first, that our understanding of a matter is always an application of it to our present concerns; and second, it means that in this application, the matter first comes to light, showing itself as what it really is.<sup>17</sup> These two theses can be described as epistemological and ontological. The epistemological consequence of Gadamer's doctrine lies in the insight that application is not a subsequent evaluation of what was first recognized in a neutral way. On the contrary, every act of understanding is a projection of one's being, to use Heidegger's language, toward the possibilities which the subject matter presents. To apply the matter to one's own situation is to understand it. This brings us to the ontological consequence of Gadamer's doctrine. The doctrine implies that, apart from the moment of application, the subject matter does not really exist. For example, the Protestant concept of the living voice of the gospel, the divine word which becomes present in spirited preaching, does not find its fulfillment in the mere repetition of New Testament formulas. Only when the preacher applies an understanding of the Christian message to the situation of the congregation is the word of God fully present. The Gadamerian doctrine of application suggests that to know a matter is to relate it to oneself, and that a universal matter truly exists in its particular manifestations.

This doctrine illuminates both the juridical preoccupation and the epistemological realism of the distinction in Catholic theology between active and objective tradition. Let us begin by sketching the critique, derived from Gadamer's doctrine, of certain features implicit in the theological distinction. The distinction between active and objective tradition can imply that objective tradition is identical with the monumental expressions of it. Such an implication might arise from the use of the terms "formal" and "material," common to the theologians of tradition.<sup>18</sup> When these theologians applied the term formal to active tradition, and material to objective tradition, they could be taken to mean that the matter of Christian tradition – its expression in ancient texts, buildings, and works of art – can be self-evidently distinguished from the form into which interpretation

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<sup>17</sup> See The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VII, esp. the section entitled "Application as Integral to Tradition."

<sup>18</sup> See A Reconsideration of the Modern Theology of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "Problems Posed by Scholastic Terminology."

puts it. One might blithely assume that there exist, on the one hand, the monuments of tradition, sufficient in themselves, which can be rightly or wrongly interpreted. And, on the other hand, one might believe oneself able to practice with facility a wholly distinct activity, namely, the application of the previous understanding of those monuments to the present situation.

In the light of Gadamer's doctrine, however, these assumptions appear questionable. Can tradition, even when considered as the matter which is transmitted, be confined to its monumental expressions? Can the transmission of traditional material, even when the avowed intention is to preserve the tradition intact, avoid explicating the material, and thus developing it? Gadamer's doctrine of application suggests a negative answer to both questions. The author of Truth and Method would say that to equate objective tradition with its monumental expressions is tantamount to equating justice with the existence of a body of law. Law is not justice. Indeed, law is only the context within which justice is to be sought, and the rigid application of law needs to be tempered by equity.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the just application of general legal principles or of precedents refines the very notion of justice, as the system of English common law testifies. Precedents are not themselves justice, but are brought forward to show what justice in a given case might be. And when they are applied to a given case, a new precedent is struck. Gadamer's doctrine of application, drawn from legal hermeneutics, suggests both the continuity and change within Christianity's active and objective tradition. While objective tradition cannot be confined to its monumental expressions, it does not contradict them. That is why theologians can speak of the material sufficiency of both Scripture and tradition: the two form a unity. But tradition is always accumulating, and in the activity of tradition its object, the gospel, is constantly revealing in new ways its very self.

In addition to providing a critique of the false inference that objective tradition is equivalent to its monuments, Gadamer's doctrine implicitly criticizes another mistaken notion which might be inferred from the distinction between active and objective tradition. This is the notion that the magisterium's active transmission of tradition offers a criterion for the truth of that tradition which is independent of the tradition itself. Such a notion could arise from the application of the ancient belief about the rule of faith to the concept of tradition. We recall that Franzelin identified active tradition with the proximate rule of faith, and objective tradition with the remote rule of faith. Billot took Franzelin's terminology and drew from it the conclusion that objective tradition (Franzelin's remote rule of faith) was not at all a part of that rule. For it to be a rule of faith, objective tradition would have to be applied, and such an application is not objective but rather active tradition. Billot feared that, once Catholic theology allowed the existence of a rule of faith distinct from the magisterium, the authority of the magisterium would be compromised. He bound the rule of faith so closely to magisterial proclamation that the magisterium was transformed into the guarantor of Christian truth. In contrast to the ancient teaching about the rule of faith, in which the rule did not include

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<sup>19</sup> See above The Philosophic Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VII, esp. the section entitled "Application as Transmission."



a criterion of truth distinct from the truth itself, Billot implied that there could be no Christian truth without its magisterial guarantors.<sup>20</sup>

In that implication, however, Billot contradicted Franzelin. The latter expressly admitted that there are doctrines within the rule of faith which have not always and everywhere been taught by the magisterium. Franzelin's point was phrased in response to the Protestant objection that Catholic dogmatic definitions, while claiming for themselves a basis in divine revelation, may not have been regarded previously as dogma.<sup>21</sup> He answered the objection by arguing that there are many obscure things in revelation, the remote rule of faith, which only gradually come to light. At one time they were understood, but this understanding may have been lost in certain communities. Only when they are clarified do they become part of the proximate rule of faith. The theologians after Franzelin who stood in his footsteps (and not in Billot's) understood this teaching in terms of prior understanding and subsequent application. Only when the obscure aspects of the remote rule of faith were understood did it become possible to apply them as the proximate rule of faith. These theologians did not anticipate the thesis of Gadamer that understanding and application are simultaneous. They did not see that it is precisely in the application of what has been revealed that the revelation is truly understood.

The Gadamerian thesis also suggests that Billot's denial of the role of objective tradition within the rule of faith betrays more concern with the criteria for testing truth than with the emergence of the truth itself. The doctrine of Billot, starting from the legitimate principle that truth is the adequation of the intellect to its object,<sup>22</sup> quickly becomes preoccupied with the limitations of language. It condemns the modernist assertion that Church teaching is relative in structure and composition by arguing that only the human speech in which sacred doctrine is couched is imperfect and deficient. The structure and composition of the divine mysteries themselves are fully adequate.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See above A Reconsideration of the Modern Theology of Tradition, esp. the section entitled "Billot's Denial that Objective Tradition Is Part of the Rule."

<sup>21</sup> Franzelin, in Part I, th. xxiii (p. 238), refers to the Lutheran theologian, Georg Calixtus (1586-1656), who advocated a Catholic-Protestant reconciliation on the basis of a common acknowledgment of what had always been taught by the apostles and the Church fathers.

<sup>22</sup> See above The Philosophic Rehabilitation of Tradition, Chapter VI, esp. the section entitled "The Categorical Link between Temporality and Truth."

<sup>23</sup> Billot (chap. 4, art. 2, p. 112) defends his point by reference to the Summa Theologiae (II-II, q. 1, art. 2): God, the object of faith, can be known by the psychological process of forming a proposition (i.e., through a mental representation) or in the judgment that God is who he is (wherein the medium is a transparent concept, and the knower is joined to the known). The modernists are overly concerned with representative propositions, Billot implies, and too little concerned with what they mediate.

Billot's argument tends to suggest that truth can be tainted by its contact with historically contingent forms of speech, and so requires the protection of a supra-historical magisterium. Although he was concerned with sophisticated interpretations of Scripture, he failed to see the point which Gadamer draws from the Platonic writings: all speech, even the truest, can be sophistically misinterpreted – and this includes the clarifications of the magisterium. Truth, however, continues to emerge as a unity. It does so precisely in the human language called imperfect and deficient by Billot. Such language arises whenever the truth is applied to a new situation, that is, when previous formulations (adequate for their time and abiding in value) no longer suffice.

### XI.3. Criteria Bequeathed by Tradition

Gadamer's doctrine of application yields more than a critique of the false inferences from and the juridical preoccupations implicit in the distinction between active and objective tradition. It tends, in addition, to substantiate the distinction's epistemological realism. Such realism consists in the argument that Christian tradition is not a neutral understanding of historical testimonies to the faith, apart from an evaluation of them. Christian tradition is rather an understanding of and adherence to revealed truth. Now it must be said that the Gadamerian doctrine, which states that there is no pure understanding apart from application, could be taken to imply that the distinction between active and objective tradition is inadmissible. One could argue that the Catholic distinction contradicts Gadamer: it suggests (1) that objective tradition refers to the object understood in its purity, (2) that active tradition refers to the application of that understanding, and (3) that the object and act are wholly separate. Gadamer makes the opposite point. Understanding and application are inseparable. But we would argue that the distinction does not exist for the sake of divorcing application from understanding. Indeed, the concession of Franzelin, that objective tradition has not always and everywhere been actively taught, serves as a prolegomenon to the integration of active and objective tradition. One does not turn one's attention to objective tradition, Franzelin suggests, until it needs to be explicated.<sup>24</sup> The legal thrust of his distinction is not that objective tradition has no application apart from active tradition, but only that the magisterium is not applying it. Arising in the controversies with Protestantism, in particular with the historicist view that Christian tradition is equivalent to historically-verifiable history, the distinction between active and objective tradition exists in order to show what a neutral, documentary history lacks. Absent is the commitment to the doctrines about which history testifies. Gadamer's concept of application, with its critique of the goal of pure understanding, makes a similar point.

When Gadamer argues that cognitive and normative understanding belong together, he means more than a criticism of the scientific ideal of objectivity and neutrality. In addition he shows, in his analysis of the hermeneutical relevance of Aristotle's practical wisdom and equity, that only when a given matter is applied in the service of a norm do we really know it. This thesis does not deny the existence of criteria for knowledge. But it does imply that there are no criteria which are not themselves ordered to cognitive ends, which are not subordinate to a pre-given norm. The criteria for

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<sup>24</sup> Franzelin, Part I, th. xxiii, section iv.

sound legal interpretation, to give a favorite example from Gadamer, do not define justice but serve it. Scriptural exegesis, to give another example, does not tell the interpreter what to believe, but clarifies a faith which is already present. Although the task of understanding does proceed according to a strict logic, the use of which can be called into question and even rejected, nevertheless understanding is not a technique which one can manipulate in abstraction, so to speak, from oneself. All apparently neutral cognition is always, Gadamer implies, a normative commitment to the truth. This is the core of Heidegger's teaching about the hermeneutical circle: not simply that one cannot escape presuppositions, but that every interpretation implicitly presupposes the existence of truth, and commits itself to it. One does not first interpret and then evaluate one's interpretation. The evaluation that one's interpretation is true remains, in Gadamer's eyes, constitutive of the interpretation itself.

Gadamer gives a remarkable illustration, in his treatment of language and the "verbum dei," of the union between understanding and the expressive application of it. He begins with an analysis of Augustine's neo-Platonic doctrine of the inner and outer word. Augustine devalued what he called the outer word, for such a word, like the body which Jesus Christ took on, exists only so that it might be perceptible to the senses. The inner word, by contrast, is the word as it really is, intelligible, distinct from all sensible manifestations.<sup>25</sup> It is this word which is one in being with the Father.<sup>26</sup> Gadamer draws from Augustine's exposition an insight into the relation between understanding and intelligence. "The inner mental word," he writes, "is as consubstantial with thought as is God the Son with God the Father."<sup>27</sup> To be sure, the inner mental or spiritual word is not consubstantial with audible speech. But that word, understood as the essence of intention, shares a relation of consubstantiality with thought. Thought mirrors what we intend.<sup>28</sup> One does not first intend something and then think it. Nor does one first determine what the truth is, only to later meditate on true things. Gadamer's point is that there are no criteria for the truth which are not themselves true.

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.xi (paragraph 20), ed. W. J. Mountain, assisted by Fr. Glorie, in *Aurelii Augustini Opera*, part 16.1-2 of 16 parts, in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, vols. 50-50A (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Typography – Pontifical Editors, 1968), 50A.486-489. Translation: *On the Trinity*, trans. Arthur West Haddan, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, ed. Marcus Dods (1871-1894), 15 vols. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1873), 7.399-401.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, XV.xiv (23).

<sup>27</sup> "Das innere Wort des Geistes ist mit dem Denken genauso wesensgleich, wie Gottsohn mit Gottvater." Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 398; trans., p. 381. The translation of "wesensgleich" – of the same essence – as "consubstantial" is unexpected but apt.

<sup>28</sup> Gadamer (*ibid.*, p. 441 footnote 1; trans., p. 423 footnote 97) refers to the *Summa Theologiae's* discussion of the contemplative life (II-II, q. 180, art. 3), in which Thomas describes meditation as the mirror-activity of speculation, "videre causam per effectum." One knows the cause of thought only through thought, which is its effect.

The consequence of this teaching for the theology of tradition is that there are no criteria for tradition which the tradition itself has not bequeathed. The active teaching of the magisterium is not a criterion for objective tradition and distinct from it. That teaching is rather an application of what has been passed on and the further transmission of it. No doubt when the magisterium proposes a doctrinal definition, it requires the assent of the whole Church to that definition as divinely revealed. But this does not mean that magisterial activity is a criterion apart from tradition. A magisterial declaration does not constitute tradition as such. Instead, the very right of the magisterium to proclaim doctrine infallibly stems from tradition and manifests it. The activity of the magisterium in the proclamation of tradition, like that of the other orders in the Church, should be seen as a prolongation of the tradition, not a criterion for the judgment of it. There are doubtless many criteria for the judgment of Christian tradition, the deliberation of which belongs to theological argument. The value of these criteria manifests itself in the course of academic history, in the decisions of the magisterium, and in the life of the Church. *But no criterion for the truth of Christian tradition lies outside the tradition.* This is the central insight to be gained from relating Gadamer's doctrine of application to the distinction between active and objective tradition.

#### XI.3.A. Seemingly External Criteria? Küng's Proposal

The relevance of Gadamer's teaching becomes apparent when one contrasts the inference we have drawn from it with contradictory currents within Catholic theology. Let us take, for example, the endorsement by Hans Küng of the proposal that Biblical exegesis is the basic theological discipline. This proposal was made in a 1979 article by a Catholic New Testament scholar at the University of Saarbrücken, Josef Blank. The article maintains that the historical-critical investigation of the Bible has introduced a new concept of theological truth, inductive, positive, and historically-anchored.<sup>29</sup> By contrast with what Blank calls an authoritarian concept of absolute truth, the new concept identifies itself with a research which is underway and in process. It has nothing to do with the substantiation of arguments from ecclesiastical tradition, which in Blank's eyes are a secondary criterion. In the course of the article, Blank criticizes Küng's 1962 discussion of the New Testament canon. At that time, in a published answer to Ernst Käsemann's attempt to re-define the New Testament canon, Küng had argued against what he perceived as Käsemann's willingness to exclude certain lines of New Testament thought.<sup>30</sup> It is in response to Blank's criticism of this 1962 article that Küng's own position becomes clear.

Küng had written that the writings which Käsemann had characterized as "early Catholicism" – the Lukan tradition, the pastoral letters, the letter of James and the second

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<sup>29</sup> Josef Blank, "Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft," Theologische Quartalschrift 159 (1979):2-23; p. 4 cited here.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Küng, "Der Frühkatholizismus im Neuen Testament als kontroverstheologisches Problem," in Das Neue Testament als Kanon, ed. Ernst Käsemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970), pp. 175-204 (first published in the Theologische Quartalschrift 142 (1962): 385-424).

letter of Peter – should not be set in contrast to the Christian gospel. Instead, the Catholic Church is led by the Scriptures, Küng wrote, when it attempts to encompass their contrasting elements and to understand the entire New Testament as the gospel.<sup>31</sup> But this unity, demanded by Küng in his 1962 article, is precisely the point of Josef Blank's 1979 critique. Blank insists that one must distinguish between the New Testament and the gospel in order to prevent apologists from taking isolated passages from the New Testament and using them to blunt the force of Scriptural themes that are more central. Küng concedes Blank's point in the same issue of the *Theologische Quartalschrift* as that in which Blank's article appears. He writes that his own early identification of New Testament and gospel was altogether too quick. Although Küng was trained as a dogmatic theologian, he writes, he is now in full agreement with Blank that Biblical exegesis is theology's basic science. To the theses that a Biblically-based Christian theology should take precedence over ecclesiastical principles, that exegesis must free itself from traditional dogmatic prejudices, and that Church tradition may no longer delineate the borders of theology, Küng gives his unqualified approval.<sup>32</sup>

This becomes even clearer as Küng lays out his own conception of exegesis as the basic science of theology. "In the search for a firm basis," he writes, "there is no other way than that which the New Testament writings themselves show, the way which allows them to reveal their own authority, in which alone they find their inner unity, a unity which opens itself directly by means of the historical-critical method: the way to the Jesus of history, who was experienced and attested to as the Christ and Lord by the community of disciples."<sup>33</sup> Here we see Küng formulate his criterion for theological truth. His criterion is the Jesus of history. The only way to this figure is the New Testament – that is why exegesis of the New Testament (there is no discussion here of the Hebrew Scriptures) is the exclusive foundation of theology. The New Testament writings are the attestation to Jesus as the Christ by the early Christian community, Küng says, but have not borrowed from that community their importance. They are rather their own authority, and enjoy a certain independence from contemporary ecclesiastical proclamations. The unity of these writings is not due to the gradual organization of them into a canon by the Christians of the first centuries. Instead, they have an inner unity, Küng writes, which they themselves manifest. The key to this unity is the historical-critical method. The application of that method reveals their unity, in Küng's opinion, providing a scientific control which makes the exegetical basis for theology a firm one.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Küng, "Historisch-kritische Exegese als Provokation für die Dogmatik," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 159 (1979): 24-36, esp. 27-9.

<sup>33</sup> "Auf der Suche nach festen Boden gibt es keinen andern Weg als den, welchen die neutestamentlichen Schriften selber weisen, auf dem sich ihre Autorität entdecken lässt, in dem allein sie ihre innere Einheit finden und der sich gerade mit der historisch-kritischen Methode auf neue Weise öffnet: den Weg zum Jesus der Geschichte, der von der Jüngergemeinde als der Christus und Herr erfahren und bezeugt wurde." *Ibid.*, p. 27.

We can now see that Küng advocates the very thing which the theology of tradition, especially in the light of Gadamer's Truth and Method, tends to exclude: the existence of a criterion for Christian tradition which is independent of the later development of that tradition. Küng's criterion is the Jesus of history. This in itself poses problems for some theologians, in whose eyes the emphasis on the historical Jesus excludes later understandings of Jesus Christ which go beyond (although without contradicting) the New Testament.<sup>34</sup> The opposition to Küng's exclusive focus on the earthly Jesus is linked to a critical examination of the historical-critical method. Some critics of Küng have cast doubt on the neutrality of that method. Because its practitioners cannot agree on the Biblical testimony to Jesus' miracles or to his divinity, say the critics, the method can hardly be said to provide a firm basis for theology.<sup>35</sup> Even if a consensus could be reached that the Jesus of history is the criterion for Christian truth, how could one ascertain who that Jesus is? What emerges from the discussion of Küng's treatment of the historical critical method is that Küng has little appreciation for the constitutive theological role of tradition. Whether by that one means the variety of historical forms in which Christianity manifests itself,<sup>36</sup> or the living faith whose object cannot be reduced to the results of critical exegesis,<sup>37</sup> the undervaluation of tradition in the writings of Küng has been a favorite theme of his critics.

We have seen that the principal insight to be gained from relating Gadamer's doctrine of application to the theological distinction between active and objective tradition is that the distinction is really a unity. Objective tradition is a transmission from the past considered in terms of what is being transmitted. Active tradition is a transmission considered in terms of how it is transmitted. Gadamer's fusion of understanding and application teaches that everything understood, including Christian tradition, is also being applied. This suggests that there is no neutral understanding which then becomes the basis for a subsequent application. The example of Küng, however, illustrates the position of those who would make a neutral (or at least historical-critical) understanding of Scripture the basis for the later application of Christian tradition. Küng does not fully appreciate the extent to which the understanding of

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Peter Chirico, "Hans Küng's Christology: An Evaluation of Its Presuppositions," Theological Studies 40 (1979): 256-272, esp. p. 266.

<sup>35</sup> See Raymond E. Brown, "'On Being a Christian' and Scripture," America 135 (1976): 343-345, esp. p. 344.

<sup>36</sup> The different forms of Christianity have developed in part from different understandings of the New Testament witness. See Avery Dulles, "Dogmatic Theology and Hans Küng's 'On Being a Christian'," America 135 (1976): 341-343, esp. p. 343.

<sup>37</sup> The living tradition of the Church brings to light the errors of Scripture. See Peter Chirico, Infallibility: The Crossroads of Doctrine (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, Inc. (Subsidiary of Universal Press Syndicate), 1977), p. 33.

Scripture is itself wedded to tradition.<sup>38</sup> The intimate bond between the two was achieved, I would say, in the formation of the Scriptural canon. All interpretation of Scripture is an unfolding of the tradition to which Scripture testifies.<sup>39</sup> And even the modern search for the central themes of the New Testament – the search for a canon within the canon – betrays the tradition of historical criticism within which the discovery of early Christian pluralism has called forth a complementary inquiry into early Christian unity. The doctrine of Küng fails to account for the various interpretive traditions to which practitioners of historical criticism consciously adhere, or for the entirety of Christian tradition which, apart from their conscious efforts, is unfolding itself in them.

Küng's insistence on formulating criteria for theological science doubtless signifies a concern for the truth of the gospel. The Tübingen theologian wants to deliver theology from what he perceives to be the dominance of those more concerned with prolonging an inauthentic ecclesiastical tradition than with the salvation wrought in and through Jesus Christ. To this end, the establishment of independent criteria appears necessary. The criteria of historical criticism seem, in Küng's opinion, to enable an access to the Jesus of history independent of ecclesiastical prejudice. But the advocacy of the historical-critical method risks the surrender of theology, not to the New Testament or to the Jesus of history, but to an exegetical school which may falsely regard itself as emancipated from the tradition embodied in Church and dogma.<sup>40</sup> Küng is not the first Catholic theologian to call for the establishment of independent criteria. Many share in varying degrees the view of Habermas, seeing in the appropriation of Gadamer's doctrines the threat of hermeneutical relativism or an acquiescence in the present order.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Although this was not the issue for which Küng's *missio canonica* was revoked, it is central to his problems with the hierarchy. See John J. Hughes, "Hans Küng and the Magisterium," Theological Studies 41 (1980): 368-389.

<sup>39</sup> Thus one can say both that the post-Biblical tradition interprets the Scriptures and that the Scriptures situate the different dogmas. See Piet Schoonenberg, "Historiciteit van het dogma," Tijdschrift voor Theologie 8 (1968): 278-311, esp. pp. 290-291. Translation: "Geschichtlichkeit und Interpretation des Dogmas," in Die Interpretation des Dogmas, ed. Piet Schoonenberg, trans. Heinrich A. Mertens (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag; 1969), pp. 58-110, esp. p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Kasper, "Von Ton, von den Grundlagen und von der Kritik in der Theologie. Metakritische Anmerkungen zu J. Blank „Exegese als theologische Basiswissenschaft," Theologische Quartalschrift 159 (1979): 36-40.

<sup>41</sup> Among the earliest treatments of Gadamer by a well-known Catholic theologian is a lecture entitled "Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics," delivered by Edward Schillebeeckx in the United States in 1967. There Schillebeeckx criticizes Gadamer (and Bultmann) for confining hermeneutical attention to the possibilities which have already been expressed, thereby ignoring the future possibilities of orthopraxis. See Edward Schillebeeckx, God the Future of Man, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), pp. 35-38. In this book Schillebeeckx refers extensively to Habermas, and mistakenly regards Gadamer as a historical skeptic. He draws this conclusion from a

Such a concern is easy to sympathize with. If understanding and application are united, if there is no objective Christian tradition apart from that activity which passes the tradition on, it may well seem as if the appeal to tradition is nothing more than a refusal to undertake the obligation of criticism.

### XI.3.B. Hilberath's Subordination of Tradition to Critique

Even Bernd Jochen Hilberath, the most thorough of the Catholic expositors of Gadamer, concurs in this judgment. His 1978 Theology between Tradition and Critique, which offers an encyclopedic review of Gadamer's doctrines and their reception, concludes by lamenting the absence of epistemological criteria in Gadamer.<sup>42</sup> The meditation on tradition in Gadamer, according to Hilberath, fails to give due weight to the human reason whose fullness lies only in the future. Gadamer's emphasis on language as that in which alone being is intelligible means a hypostasis of language and, with it, of tradition. In Hilberath's view, Gadamer practices the rehabilitation of particular traditions while refusing to offer a theoretical justification for anything but tradition in general.<sup>43</sup> In all of these objections, one sees the general tendency of those critics of Gadamer who fault him, in the name of concrete reality, for concentrating too exclusively on the abstract or transcendental conditions of understanding.

To be sure, Hilberath is by no means an extreme critic. He acknowledges that the criteria for judging traditions are themselves bequeathed by tradition. Gadamer has rightly seen, in Hilberath's opinion, that the proof of concrete Christian traditions is the task of theology, whose bonds with the past are unbreakable. One does not believe in the resurrection simply because it accords with our criteria of what is historical, Hilberath says, but because it constitutes a Christian tradition which theology preserves in critical appropriation.<sup>44</sup> Hilberath appreciates Gadamer's delicacy in allowing the content of

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misreading of Wahrheit und Methode (p. 502; trans., p. 481), believing that the skepticism which Gadamer criticizes in Löwith is Gadamer's own position.

Schillebeeckx's later treatment of Gadamer elaborates his earlier position. Gadamer's hermeneutics, he states, are only theoretical, and provide no criterion for the correctness of theological interpretation (Schillebeeckx, Geloofsverstaan: Interpretatie en Kritiek, vol. 5 in the series Theologische Peilingen (Bloemendaal, Holland: H. Nelissen, 1972), p. 99; translation: The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: The Seabury Press (A Crossroad Book), 1974), p. 57).

<sup>42</sup> Hilberath's book has been reviewed by Heinz-Günther Stobbe, "B. J. Hilberath: Theologie zwischen Tradition und Kritik," Theologische Revue 75 (1979): 46-49, who takes a far dimmer view of Gadamer than Hilberath himself. See Chapter XII below, esp. the section entitled "Stobbe's Distinction between Catholic Tradition and Effective History."

<sup>43</sup> Bernd Jochen Hilberath, Theologie zwischen Tradition und Kritik. Die philosophische Hermeneutik Hans-Georg Gadamer als Herausforderung des theologischen Selbstverständnisses (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1978), pp. 293-294, 308.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 309-310.



theology itself to be its own guide, and ecclesiastical authority its own law.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless Hilberath remains preoccupied, from the perspective of Catholic hermeneutics, with defining theological criteria. His work betrays an exaggerated dependence upon those for whom critical analysis is more important than constructive synthesis. To this extent he misses the value of Gadamer's doctrine of application, which aims to show the unity of cognition and evaluation, of the knower and the known.

Catholic hermeneutics, the understanding of Christianity within Catholicism, does not approach tradition from the outside, testing it before appropriating it. On the contrary, it assumes that the Catholic knower is already a part of the Christianity which is to be known. This is also what the theological distinction between active and objective tradition, when rightly understood, can teach us. In theology, the knower and the known belong together. What then is the verification of Christian truth? If the theologian belongs to the tradition of the Church, what does it mean to verify, that is, to weigh the truth, of what the Church teaches? How does one verify what one already believes? These are the questions which Chapter XII shall address.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 312,316.