

SOME RULES FOR THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: A SEARCH FOR PROPERLY THEOLOGICAL WARRANTS

I am really interested in the truth of religious questions. But judging whether a revelational statement is true demands attending to many levels of individual and corporate engagement. The first context is linguistic: affirmations like "God raised Jesus from the dead" culminate a host of connected stories whose grammar is summarized by the ancient creeds. Yet linguistic contexts are themselves rooted in ways of life: practices and disciplines which offer individual choices richer patterns of meaning. Finally, this language, together with the practices it expresses, exhibits the initiative and power of God. Any statement which bears revelatory promise will come so freighted; our challenge will be to uncover its potency with care.

How does theology carry out this task? We tend to speak of the mediating role of argument, or of the clarifying role of exposition. When theological argument "mediates," however, what is it trying to reconcile? Is it simply negotiating a way from premises to conclusions? Or is it attempting to unravel confused experience with clarifying assertions? Or does it mean to connect parts of ourselves which tend to be at odds, like head and heart? If it is clarification (or elucidation) that we seek, to what end? That we might then find ourselves in a better position to accept what is said as true—that is, as conferring a true shape on our lives?

If we but remind ourselves of the role theology plays in offering mediating argument or in presenting clarifying elucidations, we will have satisfied the demand that it be public discourse. If we attend sufficiently to the structure of argument or elucidation, we will not have to pretend that we are "basing" religious assertions on anything like "common human experience." That is, we can assure theology a place in the domain of public discourse without having to assume that all argument proceeds from a primary stratum which serves as a foundation. Nor will we have to identify such a stratum with "common human experience," as though that phrase in fact referred to anything determinate. For what become commonly accessible are the arguments, even if the starting points those arguments presuppose remain imbedded in language practices and in a history which reflect the power of God.

Furthermore, to underscore theology as public discourse in this fashion will also temper theologians' temptations to regard themselves as prophets or even as astute critics of the status quo. For prophetic assertion demands authenticity as its warrant, while trenchant criticism claims its authority from participation in a shared struggle. Accepting a secure berth in an academic institution, however, condemns one to making one's way by argument; that is how most of us earn our right to be listened to.

It is in this larger perspective, then, that we are invited to reflect upon the ways we use and criticize theological argument, trying to spell out (a) what it is that we expect as a theologian proceeds to make a point, and (b) what we miss when it is not there—to the point where we might find ourselves criticizing a work by insisting that it is not even theology! Moreover, the force of such a critique reminds us that not everything is a matter of opinion: there is a commonly accepted set of minimal expectations with which we in fact operate. By trying to articulate those expectations, this essay offers an initial step towards clarification of our common task.

Can we develop a set of criteria (or at least checkpoints) which would allow us to be satisfied that a particular inquiry had attained a properly theological resolution? I am not thinking of a touchstone for truth or falsity, since one or another of the criteria may fall short of adequate formulation or fail in application. I am rather asking whether we can achieve some consensus on the sort of tests to which theological statements should be submitted, so that one would know how to test their adequacy, or at least be forestalled from offering an unrefined product.

A request of this sort conjures up Descartes' quest for "Rules of Method." Yet we have learned in the meantime that no such rule can be unequivocally formulated; even the rules themselves will be contestable. Why then make the effort? Because the effort itself—to formulate a set of rules leading to resolution—will help us to identify what we intend when we make a theological statement. I focus on resolution as a way of determining a checklist less restrictive than verification. I speak of a series of tests in the hope of achieving procedural adequacy, at best, in characterizing a statement as theological.

The steps outlined become procedures as we adopt settled ways of negotiating them. Different "models" for theology would be identified by the procedures they recommend as well as the relative importance they assign to each step. The steps are proposed as singly necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for a statement being called theological. That claim is already immensely ambitious, of course, although we use some such scale all the time to pass judgment on one another's work. So this process pretends to do no more than bring to articulation those implicit checkpoints we customarily employ to ascertain whether one has managed to mount a theological argument.

Moreover, these steps are minimal and purposely so. For we may be deficient by omitting a step or by failing to negotiate it very well. Yet the failures are notably different, since others would stand a better chance of improving upon our work if we had attempted to satisfy each checkpoint, and to proceed without attention to one or another would tacitly be recommending a new paradigm for theological inquiry. Hence the force as well as the modesty of this proposal. Failure to reach agreement on this or any set of norms would hardly vitiate theological inquiry, but it could set us asking whether the diverse "models" resulting could reasonably be collected under the single genus of theology. We

might discover sheer diversity rather than pluralism. On the other hand, the very effort to articulate criteria for resolving theological argument can at least bring us to a keener awareness of what we are trying to do.

Allow me to suggest the following checkpoints which any theological statement will have to satisfy, and to satisfy in a manner which theological practice will clarify. In the course of arguing for a thesis, that thesis will have to:

- (1) be a plausible interpretation of a religious tradition (or manifestly founding one),
- (2) be capable of being understood in the successive ways appropriate to articles of faith—that is, correlated with degrees of personal appropriation (or levels of authenticity),
- (3) be in some manner constitutive of a community's work and worship.
- (4) be sufficiently determinate so that one will be able to identify deviations in understanding or in practice,
- (5) display an awareness that the formulation offered remains inadequate to its task, yet does so in a specific enough way so as to offer some guidance in understanding it,
- (6) suggest steps which one might take to sharpen that awareness (5): practices analogous to verification procedures for scientific statements.

As should be clear immediately, each step tries to capture an intellectual movement associated with theological inquiry. Some of them remind one of the work of a particular theologian, who proved particularly adept in that dimension of theological argument, and should be offered as a model for fulfilling that criterion. The entire effort, of course, represents an attempt to move out beyond Hegel (as people other than Fackenheim read him) and to counter the search for *the* critical norm to decide theological discussions with a series of hurdles, each of which needs to be negotiated in a critical fashion.

(1) That a putative theological statement should interpret a religious tradition captures the "positive" element and distinguishes such statements from metaphysical ones. The limiting case of founding statements is mentioned only to reinforce the contention that theological assertions have their significance in relation to an activity we call religious in which people other than theologians engage. The primary documents of the tradition will receive the most sustained attention because such documents intend to direct the activity itself. Traditional practices will also require scrutiny as they convey the understanding of the documents by constituting the "plausibility structures" wherein one learns how to use the primary language of the tradition. Lest this requirement seem conservative, we can remind ourselves of the substantial alterations sustained by religious traditions in the course of their development. What it would rule out would be modish reinterpretations more parasitic on a tradition than re-presenting it. How easily theologians can assume the role of authorizing change by adopting the knowing stance: "we used to say that, but now we can say. . . ." Yet the "we" in patterns like these could prove equivocal, if the new formulation failed to carry forward consistently the community's faith.

(2) The requirement that a theological statement be capable of a successive understanding correlated with degrees of inwardness or authenticity intends to capture the way semantic structure embodies intent. The key expressions of such statements will contain analogous terms, and will do so because they address issues germane to human aspiration. Any account of the resurrection of the Lord will have to acknowledge that neither "resurrection" nor "Lord" convey a mere fact. Furthermore, statements ingredient in this affirmation will play different roles at various stages in a person's individuation, so the difficulties attendant on understanding will shift as well. The work of John S. Dunne exemplifies this dimension quite well, as do the efforts of those who see theological argument as exercising a therapeutic role in one's quest for understanding.

(3) The reason for the second requirement—that theological statements address issues germane to human aspiration—leads into the third: that one version of such statements help to constitute the work and worship of a community. This requirement contends that there must be a "narrative dimension" to any theological assertion. There must be a way in which it contributes to constituting the self; and since persons realize themselves together, the self-in-community. This role may be quite implicit, but it will be able to be shown, and in doing so, offer a test of one's comprehension of the statement.

This requirement is epistemological and reinforces (2), for analogous expressions require paradigm instances if we are to understand them properly. Moreover, the paradigm instance that is most accessible is the one in which I am involved. Furthermore, to bring that involvement to light and to appreciate the way it is shaped by a theological position, is to make the statement, together with one's own practice, available for criticism. Much of the discussion concerning the Creator's ways of relating to creation can be drawn out in this direction, and traditional trinitarian doctrine can be mined in a similar fashion (cf. the chapter on "process" theology in my *Aquinas: God and Action* [Notre Dame, 1978].)

(4) If theological statements in some measure shape personal and social practice, then they must be sufficiently determinate so that one can discriminate deviant practices and interpretations from faithful ones. An ethos of tolerance has much to recommend it, and the acrimony of heresy-hunting usually overshadowed any intellectual skills it may have developed, but surely there is a middle road. We usually take that road muttering uncomplimentary things, yet the institution of theological inquiry demands that we exercise this critical function publicly. When a statement is so ample as to admit contrary understandings, or so bizarre as to lead to invidious practices, or so fuzzy as to countenance most any interpretation, one can hardly let it be warranted because it promises liberation. This requirement is a thoroughly common one to every discipline, yet bears special reference to theological statements as they intend to constitute coherent practices. So, for example, to assert that believing in Christ is tantamount to affirming the goodness

of human experience is surely to lose the original consistency of that distinctive act of faith.

(5) Orthodox theologians have long accused us of attempting syntheses of faith which would make the entire activity comprehensible and available to reason. Whatever the merits of their criticism in particular cases, it sounds ironic when coupled with philosophers criticizing us for pretending to fashion statements invulnerable to falsification. The point of the Orthodox criticism, however, may be accurate, for we have proven relatively unskilled in acknowledging how it is that our theological statements mean to assert things which remain (strictly speaking) incomprehensible. In other words, we are treading in mystery, and we know it. Yet we would rather not admit it, for (in a much less precise use of the term) that is precisely what our other academic colleagues accuse us of doing!

The only way out of this *cul-de-sac* is to turn about and face the charge head-on. In fact, of course, any statement which purports to be constitutive of human life and destiny defies framework-adequacy, precisely because it is a limiting statement (cf. Alisdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and Philosophy of Science," *Monist* 60 [1977], 453-72). So we must learn how to express theological statements so that they display their own inadequacy. Similarly, we need to be able to construct the sort of supporting commentary which shows people how to use the display of inadequacy to guide further understanding.

This is certainly the most confusing requirement, yet the judgment it tries to articulate is the one we characteristically make to distinguish genuine contenders from time-servers, and one who altogether loses sight of this feature of theological statements will only obtain extrinsic mention in the history of religious thought. As DeLubac summarily remarked of a group writing on grace at Louvain in the eighteenth century: *ils ont perdu le sens de Dieu!* Similarly, contemporaries who would devote their efforts to spelling out just how God relates to the world would seem to have lost sight of the limitations of our shared vantage point.

(6) The final requirement would disqualify most of us who write for academic audiences—if we have not retired already. Yet it follows directly from the previous requirement: that theological statements embody an awareness they are dealing with mystery; and indirectly from (2): that their semantic structure leaves them open to successive understandings. This statement, however, makes it explicit that theological affirmation, especially when acknowledged to be inadequate, leads inescapably to spiritual practices. And this requirement represents an epistemological demand, not a pious recommendation.

It is the pressure of verification/falsification which forces this requirement upon us. One's quest to determine what theological statements mean leads a person to see that they can never quite say what they mean. Yet they are not indeterminate for that, but in fact lead one to adopt certain practices designed to enlighten a person further regarding

the intent of the statement. If one ventures these practices (stimulated by the reminder that we are already engaged in many whose parameters elude our comprehension) and does attain a better understanding of what is meant, that person may not be able to find any more felicitous expression of the matter. But he should be able better to display the gap between expression and intent—better show forth, that is, the virtuosity inherent in the analogous expressions employed. And if the person is adept at bringing comparisons to light she may also be able to show that it is not unreasonable to ask that we adopt certain practices to further religious understanding, since every other field of human endeavor involves long apprenticeships for those who would attempt to understand it. An extended autobiographical essay of the quality of Augustine's *Confessions* brings this dimension into clearest focus, as it spells out the way understanding relates to practice.

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Perhaps the prolix commentary needed for each step renders the entire enterprise hopeless for a common task. For anyone could take issue with any one of my comments, to say nothing of the steps themselves. On the other hand, it may be worth the effort to determine whether we can formulate any criteria common to theological statements as such. That effort could help clarify ambiguities lurking in current fascination with "models." Furthermore, I suspect each of us operates with some such set anyway. These are offered in a teasing spirit: to tease out our own.

DAVID BURRELL, C.S.C.
University of Notre Dame