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## **GADAMER, BARTH, AND TRANSCENDENCE IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

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**Abstract.** The essay reflects on how Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl Barth view interpretation of the Christian Bible. It proceeds in three main sections. The first contends that Gadamer secularizes Christian theology, and that this has drawbacks for the sort of reading his hermeneutic can give to Christian Scripture. The second part turns to Barth, arguing that the whole structure of his approach to the Bible factors in theological commitment, with benefits for the readings he can deliver. The final part makes a case that contemporary reflection on interpretation can nonetheless glean important insights from Gadamer, especially regarding the readerly reception of texts, because his perspective has a certain sort of richness that Barth's cannot match. The overall suggestion emerging from the interrogation of these two thinkers is that phenomenology and theology might learn from one another, that they each contribute something valuable to discussions of biblical interpretation.

### **I.**

In discussions about continental philosophy's utility for Christian theology, a perennial question arises: do phenomenological concepts serve to secularize Christian ideas, thus compromising their integrity, or do they illuminate what it means for human beings to make fundamental choices in life, which capacity is prior to a person choosing to embrace or reject a religious faith?<sup>1</sup> A similar question emerges in debates about theological hermeneutics, the interpretation of sacred texts. In that context, the issue is this: do phenomenological concepts (once again) secularize Christian thought, or, alternatively, do they uncover the nature of any human attempt to understand written works? The query is, obviously, massive in scope. This essay develops a single case study, homing in on Hans-Georg Gadamer, arguably the single most influential figure in Philosophical Hermeneutics during the twentieth century, and it draws a counter-perspective from Karl Barth, who is widely seen as the towering figure within Protestant theology during the same timeframe. The first section below contends that Gadamer is indeed secularizing Christian theology, and that this limits the sorts of reading his approach can give to the Christian Bible. The second section turns to Barth, arguing that he demonstrates how the whole structure of an approach to the Bible can take its cue from theological commitment, with benefits for the resulting readings. The final part makes the case that contemporary reflection on interpretation nonetheless has gleaned and may continue to glean important insights from Gadamer, especially regarding the reception of texts. His thinking here has a richness that Barth's cannot quite match. The suggestion that underlies all these sections is that phenomenology and theology might learn from one another.

### **II.**

To make the case that there is a secularizing drive in Gadamer, it is important to clarify the analytical term *theology* as it functions in this paper. Here *theology* means discourse referring to God. In theory, of course the terminology might mean any number of other things. For instance, first, it might refer to the

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1 Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2014), 157–58.

transfer of classically divine attributes to things that would have been classified as creaturely in a medieval or Reformation point of view, such as human beings or the physical world.<sup>2</sup> Michael Gillespie argues that the culture of modernity is theological in the sense that this transposition dominates it. Or, second, something might be theological in that it has a form that was originally filled in by language about God, yet this form has since been vacated of specifically Christian content and subsequently “reoccupied.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps prejudice and tradition are forms that were once but are no longer filled in by robustly Christian material. Or, third, in principle, theology could denote ideas that were developed in conversation with sources that are theological in this essay’s primary sense. It is uncontroversial that Gadamer’s understanding of hermeneutics is theological in this way. But, by stipulation, theology does not refer here to any of these three things. Theological language means, once more, making reference to God. By way of preview, the most obvious and fully elaborated examples of theological language in *Truth and Method* employ it to stand for something more general: notions that can be explicated, and most often are expounded in Gadamer’s text, through a set of categories with a more immanent or mundane cast.

Framing the discussion this way may raise a critical question. Why assign this particular meaning to theological discourse as an initial step toward mounting an argument for the conclusion above? Is the conclusion not simply obvious to anyone who is already familiar with Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* and the history of reflection on interpretation? Theology plays a more substantial role mainly in the regionalized or special hermeneutical approaches that have given way to general and radical hermeneutics in modernity. The conclusion is not a trite one, however, as it bears significant implications for the readings of the Bible that Gadamer’s interpretive paradigm can generate. That is, just as language making reference to God does not play an irreducible role in constituting Gadamer’s account of what interpretation is, so also his readings of the Bible make only tentative reference to God.<sup>4</sup> There is, thus, a connection between the material content of how Gadamer conceives of the reader, the text, and reading, on the one hand, and the results that this account delivers when readers apply it to the Bible. Formulating the engagement with Gadamer in this way will bring into sharp focus this limit but, as we shall see in the final section, also the value of his approach.

*Truth and Method* contains three major cases in which Gadamer reduces theological language, or what could be theological language, to something else: in each case, he historicizes theology, using it to stand for something immanent.<sup>5</sup> A first instance of the historicization of theology is what Gadamer refers to as “theological hermeneutics” or reflection on homiletical interpretation of Scripture in the context of worship. Preaching that brings the scriptural word to bear on the lives of the congregation functions as a model for application being integral to any act of reading. Gadamer opens discussion of the “Recovery of the Fundamental Hermeneutic Problem” with a mention of the Pietist theologian J. J. Rambach, for whom reading was incomplete without an applicatory moment.<sup>6</sup> Gadamer commends this older approach, but only insofar as application has a respected place within interpretation, by contrast with post-Romantic thinking, in which “the edifying application of Scripture in Christian preaching ... now seemed very different from the historical and theological understanding of it.”<sup>7</sup> For Gadamer, it is

2 Michael A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008).

3 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (MIT Press, 1983).

4 Some further complexities are remarked upon in literature that notes this point: Walter Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine* (Continuum, 2008), 3; John Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 357; David Vessey, “Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Philosophy of Religion”, *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 8 (2010): 645. See also Philippe Eberhard, “Gadamer and Theology”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, no. 9 (2007): 283–300; Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Baker, 2004), 179–86, both of which are deeply sympathetic to Gadamer while judging that theologians who use him should do more with theology than he himself does.

5 Gadamer is not a historicist if that term denotes an insistence that texts be read only in their context of origin. The point above concerns the constituent elements of his account of reading, not (directly) which reading context matters.

6 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum, 2004), 306. For the original German, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Mohr Siebeck, 1975).

7 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

necessary to go beyond the Pietists and to radicalize the call for application by seeing *all* understanding as shaped by applicatory concerns. How so? Readers come to texts with formed, determinate questions that drive their engagement with the texts. These questions reflect the reader's location in a specific historical situation. Application is an ingredient within all interpretive activity, not in the sense that readers must do what a text calls upon them to do, but in that the text speaks to the questions readers pose. These questions are not forever fixed, but interpretation cannot take place without some delimitation from interpreters' queries. Fields in which application has a clear prominence — legal hermeneutics counts here in the same basic way that theological hermeneutics does — become symbols for hermeneutics tout court.

Integrating application into reading in this way implies that all textual understanding involves a living relationship between text and interpreter, a prior connection on the part of the reader to the subject matter of which the text speaks. In the domain of theological hermeneutics, this verges on an insistence that a faith commitment is needed in order to read the scriptural text. Gadamer uses Bultmann's language of fore-understanding to refer to the understanding of a topic with which the text deals, and which is present prior to one's reading, and he asks whether the hermeneutical significance of fore-understanding in theology is itself theological.<sup>8</sup> The question is whether the reader must make specifically theological presuppositions to engage with the text if a prior acquaintance with the subject is indeed required. In other words, is a faith commitment ultimately necessary for reading the Bible? Gadamer contends that if a given reader does turn to the text with a set of theological commitments that she has received from the Christian tradition, this collection of commitments must be put at risk in the process of reading.<sup>9</sup> They constitute a collection of expectations and convictions that play a role in reading, yet in their particularity they are corrigible, not so sacrosanct as to be above critical scrutiny. All that is necessary by way of having a pre-understanding is that the text be seen as making claims to truth about issues of concern to the reader. The text is a voice that *speaks*, not one that only *spoke* in the past.<sup>10</sup> Concluding his treatment of theological hermeneutics, Gadamer says, "Hence the primary thing is application,"<sup>11</sup> in the broad sense that the written work comes to bear on the reader's questions, rather than operating as a mere past act of communication. Therefore, even in theological hermeneutics, "Dogmatics cannot claim any primacy."<sup>12</sup>

Second, like theological hermeneutics, Christology also becomes a symbol for something more general. Gadamer develops an account of language according to which a small linguistic unit, such as a declarative sentence, is not a self-sufficient expression of meaning. An utterance bears meaning only in relation to the wider dialogue of which it is a part. Instead of standing alone, a sentence responds to questions and other claims, both of which have presuppositions and a history. Over against what he takes to be Anglo-American philosophy's fixation on propositions, and its attempt to make their every element explicit and clear by formalizing them apart from their dialogical ecosystem,<sup>13</sup> there is for Gadamer always a hinterland to meaning that is as important as it is hard to pin down. Gadamer compares this to orthodox trinitarian theology, as it is found in Augustine and others.<sup>14</sup> Within such theology, the Word is consubstantial with God the Father, becoming incarnate and thus revealing God to human beings by sharing the divine nature. The inner word that lies in the mind (and is revealed by external words that are spoken or written) reflects and points to what is ultimately thought, just as the Father's identity is revealed by the Son, while at the same time the Father and Son are distinguishable from one another as persons. Here Christological doctrine serves as a symbol for the infinite depth of linguistic meaning generally. Gadamer himself describes the Augustinian idea of the "inner word" as lying at the very heart

8 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 328.

9 *Ibid.*, 328.

10 *Ibid.*, 328.

11 *Ibid.*, 328.

12 *Ibid.*, 326.

13 On the subtext of Gadamer's work, I am indebted to Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Yale Univ. Press, 1994), 118–19.

14 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 418–21.

of his outlook on hermeneutics, so he clearly owes a significant debt to Augustine.<sup>15</sup> Yet Gadamer's appropriation of the *verbum interius* theme shears off its theologically specific content and employs it as a basic point about the operation of language.

Third, Gadamer does a great deal to expound how the finitude of the interpreting subject plays into the process of reading, and while finitude in other contexts bears a theologically specific meaning, it has a more generic valence here. One commentator insightfully says, "In a sense, the whole of Gadamer's hermeneutics wishes to remind us that we are not gods"<sup>16</sup> (note that the letter *g* is in lower-case here). For Gadamer, the sense in which we are not divine is that we have a limited perspective, or a defined and specific horizon that shapes our lives and engagement with texts. That is, interpretation is subject- or party-specific, a point he stresses over against approaches that focus on the historical location of the text alone. Any adequate account of understanding must factor in the historically specific position of both text and reader. As Gadamer says, if we transpose ourselves into the shoes of ancient people while reading a classic text, we put *ourselves* in their shoes.<sup>17</sup> We are not human beings in general, and we most certainly do not have a God's-eye view on the world; we are people equipped with a specific set of tools by means of which to understand textual content. How we understand is a function of our distinctive language and the questions that loom large in our context. This way of writing finitude into a hermeneutical framework assumes that finitude refers to some basic this-worldly limits of the reader, not a reader's contingency on God, for instance as a creaturely being. Gadamer's version of finitude contains distant echoes of a more determinate theological tradition, but it is not intended to invoke any definite theological claims.

Just as Gadamer brings theological language within a historicized register, the notions at the center of his view of interpretation — prejudice, tradition, and the fusion of horizons — likewise have an immanent cast. For Gadamer, prejudice (*Vorurteil*) means "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined."<sup>18</sup> If, contra Gadamer, all interpretive judgments grow out of a detailed investigation that interpreters have either done themselves, or at least can access and assess critically, then prejudice must have the negative connotations it typically bears within Enlightenment critique.<sup>19</sup> What makes prejudice in Gadamer's distinctive sense legitimate? He challenges the Enlightenment's simple binary relationship between text and interpreter, such that initial hypotheses about the text's message must come either just from textual data or from ill-founded estimates ventured by the interpreting subject based on his expectations about what he will find in the text. In the case of classic texts, written works that have established for themselves a history of effects, interpreters have already been influenced by them, even before they have had a chance to undertake a first-hand examination. There can thus be no dualism of text and reader because the reader is always already affected by the text. The best interpretations will emerge when readers bring as much as possible of this history of effects to explicit consciousness. Good reading involves gaining awareness of one's prejudices and testing them — not seeking to eliminate all prejudice because it is per se inadmissible, but aiming to mobilize the true prejudices one has and allowing them to connect one to the claims of the text. Gadamer reports that the German Enlightenment recognized that there can be "true

15 Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, xii–xiv. This passage and its broader context have generated a great deal of debate. On the theme of the inner word and Gadamer's utilization of sources, see Arthos, *The Inner Word in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*; Mirela Oliva, *Das innere Verbum in Gadamer's Hermeneutik* (Mohr Siebeck, 2009). Grondin has written prolifically on the passage and its background; see his relatively recent contributions: Jean Grondin, "L'universalité de l'herméneutique et de la rhétorique: Ses sources dans le passage de Platon à Augustin dans Vérité et Méthode", *Revue internationale de philosophie*, no. 54 (2000): 469–85; Jean Grondin, "Unterwegs zur Rhetorik: Gadamer's Schritt von Platon zu Augustin in Wahrheit und Methode", in *Hermeneutische Wege: Hans-Georg Gadamer zum Hundertsten*, ed. Günter Figal, Jean Grondin and Dennis J. Schmidt (Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 207–18. There is a rejoinder in David Vessey, "The Medieval Roots of Hermeneutic Universality". The focus of these discussion is Gadamer's use of sources, with due acknowledgement of their differences over against Gadamer's employment of them, while my focus is on the significance of what Gadamer most obviously does *not* draw from figures such as Augustine and Aquinas.

16 Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer* (Acumen, 2003), 96.

17 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

18 *Ibid.*, 273.

19 *Ibid.*, 273.



prejudices,” and that these are to be found in the Christian religion,<sup>20</sup> but his point is primarily to authorize the whole category of prejudice and to say that some prejudices are indeed true, not to privilege prejudices with certain material content.<sup>21</sup>

Prejudices in this salutary sense are carried by tradition, established histories of interpretation that form the horizon of our present knowledge. Traditions confer assumptions, expectations, and habits of linguistic usage, all of which shape engagement with the classical texts that people read today. In this sense, tradition is a formal, not material, notion. It does not provide sponsorship of any particular sort of content, such as a particular theological tradition, but rather seeks to legitimize the principle that human beings always exist in a wider social web that predisposes them toward certain assumptions, expectations, and habits. Underscoring the utility of tradition in this way does not displace the need for reasoning. For Gadamer, the decision to defer to tradition is a rationally based judgment. It is not a matter of utterly blind trust or submission to a binding command that one cannot evaluate at all. Rather, it grows out of the recognition of one’s own limitations as a thinker and of the value of the insights contained in texts with enduring influence.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore reason-based deference and trust in a person, and by implication the content they have communicated.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the traditions toward which one defers become starting points that one thinks about and modifies, as needed. Because this notion of tradition is formal rather than material, it is not structurally theological but reflects a historicized perspective on interpretation and stresses its intersubjective component.

Gadamer’s way of conceptualizing the practice of interpretation, the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), also has an immanent cast, in the sense that even when the text being read makes reference to God, such reference does not encompass the reader’s engagement with the text. In the fusion of horizons, the text reaches out, as it were, to the reader by establishing a history of effects within the reader’s culture. Readers, for their part, reach toward the text in that the prejudices that they have facilitate their engagement with the text’s subject matter, at least in a good case. Reading itself is a dialogical exchange between text and reader in which meaning comes to light.<sup>24</sup> Interpretation is a conversation in which neither horizon sets the terms for the entire exchange:

Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other.<sup>25</sup>

Compare this with what Erich Auerbach says about how the Hebrew Bible presses its readers to situate their point of view within its own. Scripture

presents universal history: it begins with the beginning of time, with the creation of the world, and will end with the Last Days, the fulfilling of the Covenant, with which the world will come to an end. Everything else that happens in the world can only be conceived as an element in this sequence.<sup>26</sup>

20 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 275.

21 Ibid., 275.

22 Ibid., 281. Because Gadamer seems so deferential to tradition, subsequent figures have sought out resources to discover and challenge systematic distortions within historical trajectories of thinking. Gadamer does have a place for critique of traditions, but he does little to discern the presence of subterranean distortions that run through whole traditions of reflection. For ways to redress this, see Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Fortress Press, 1984), 160–63; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (SCM Press, 1991), 64–77.

23 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 281.

24 Gadamer’s stress on the active role the reader plays within interpretation may raise the spectre of relativism in the minds of some. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this question in detail. But John McDowell provides a useful rebuttal of the claim that in Gadamer’s thinking the world is a “creature of our conceptual activity,” something created by our cognitive operations. See John McDowell, “Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism,” in *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward and Jens Kertscher (MIT Press, 2002), 173–93, at 78. I appreciate Godehard Brüntrup drawing my attention to the relevance of this essay.

25 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

26 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2013), 16.

Further, when “the new and strange world which now comes into view and which, in the form in which it presents itself, proves to be wholly unutilizable within the Jewish religious frame, must be so interpreted that it can find a place there.”<sup>27</sup> This comparison illuminates Gadamer’s view by juxtaposing it with a fundamentally different way to relate the horizons, one in which a single horizon includes or incorporates the other, rather than setting them in rough parity.<sup>28</sup> For Gadamer, the reader is certainly fallible,<sup>29</sup> her horizon evolves over time<sup>30</sup> (horizons “can travel, change, extend, as you climb a mountain, for instance”<sup>31</sup>), and there *is* such a thing as a reader culpably imposing her point of view on a text.<sup>32</sup> Still the classic never comes to define the reader’s world.

This becomes clear both in Gadamer’s view of dialogue and in his explication of language. First, dialogue. Proper reading requires interpreters to identify the question a text is trying to answer.<sup>33</sup> Historical investigation is useful toward this end. Knowing something about the text’s setting of genesis is worth the effort, where such historical reconstruction proves possible. Yet interpreters must always do more than just investigate this query historically, for the historical horizon is not fully comprehensive. “The most important thing is the question that the text puts to us, our being perplexed by the tradionary word, so that understanding it must already include the task of historical self-mediation between the present and tradition.”<sup>34</sup> We as readers must find an answer to the question that satisfies us, because these are classic texts, ones that engage our attention, and our answers become enmeshed with those the text provides because we have no pure form of access to the text’s substance. The answer that the text provides is by no means definitive: “Understanding the word of tradition always requires that the reconstructed question be set within the openness of its questionableness — i.e., that it merge with the question that tradition is for us.”<sup>35</sup> Readers attend to texts, not seeking final answers, but ranging about for new horizons that offer them fresh possibilities, ones that may challenge their prior conceptions and extend their horizons in unexpected ways, yet all without foreclosing further critical reflection.<sup>36</sup>

Second, language. What Gadamer says here clarifies the sense in which our questions and answers necessarily merge with those of the text. For Gadamer, there is no pure mental domain of understanding because all understanding occurs via a linguistic medium. Language structures and delimits what human beings know. Any act of understanding a text resembles translating a text from a foreign language, in which it was composed, into one’s own. Gadamer says: “In order to be able to express a text’s meaning and subject matter, we must translate it into our own language.”<sup>37</sup> What makes a merger necessary is the further point that “this involves relating it to the whole complex of possible meanings in which we linguistically move.”<sup>38</sup> When Gadamer insists that we understand only via *our own* language, does that entail that readers must force fit textual claims into their pre-existing set of categories, even if they do not fit the text well? If so, interpretation collapses into imposition. The language that structures understanding is not the pre-fusion discourse, the reader’s existing stock of terms, but rather the terms that emerge from the fusion.<sup>39</sup> Readers coming to terms with book XIII of Augustine’s *Confessions* are not obligated to understand the change

27 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 16.

28 It is possible that Gadamer conceives of the reader’s horizon as being *more* important than that of the text. But even without establishing this point with any more clarity, there remains a major contrast with Barth, whose theology is the focus of the third section of this essay. The purpose of this article is to point out the watershed divide between the two thinkers and to assess the contribution of each.

29 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 390.

30 *Ibid.*, 366.

31 Charles Taylor, “Gadamer on the Human Sciences”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 138.

32 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.

33 *Ibid.*, 356–71.

34 *Ibid.*, 366.

35 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 367.

36 Weinsheimer Joel C., *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 210–11.

37 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 397.

38 *Ibid.*, 397.

39 Taylor, 138.

that occurs to Augustine in the Milan garden as a religious conversion, since this terminology is likely to overlay the text with a modern, privatized notion of religion. Rather, they should struggle toward a new language that reflects both the text and who they are. On Gadamer's view of language, readers should not force texts into the procrustean bed of their established views. The very process of understanding decenters their views, at least by virtue of calling upon them to wrestle with another possible construal of a significant subject matter. But neither can any text subsume them within its world. No text has that privilege.

What kind of biblical readings does this account of interpretation produce? The material content of Gadamer's account correlates with the substance of its deliverances. Because of the rough parity between horizons in the process of fusion, the biblical text only ever constitutes one side of a complex conversation in which neither side determines the other side's self-understanding. And if the horizon of the interpreter is secular in Charles Taylor's third sense, where secular refers to a society "in which [belief in God] is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace,"<sup>40</sup> then it makes sense that the readings to which the paradigm gives rise will not be much more theological than the account itself. It is fair to classify Gadamer as seeing his world as secular in this sense, despite both his obvious interest in theology and his dialogue with major figures from the Christian tradition, because he himself sees belief as an intriguing possibility, one worth probing, but useful for interpretation precisely to the extent that its content stands for more general ideas.<sup>41</sup>

The theological yield of Gadamer's New Testament readings is indeed modest. Gadamer recognizes that the New Testament is a distinctive text, one that is not identical with other religious works.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as he sees it, the question to which the New Testament is responding is how to cope with anxiety in the face of death.<sup>43</sup> It is hard to imagine a reader coming to this conclusion, were it not that "reconstructing the question to which the meaning of a text is understood as an answer merges with our own questioning."<sup>44</sup> Gadamer's construal of the text's subject matter slants his engagement with the text toward general human concerns about mortality. His understanding of the text's basic topic also obscures God's centrality within the text. Gadamer sees the New Testament as posing a challenge to *human self-understanding*.<sup>45</sup> More specifically, the essential claim of the text, as he sees it, is that salvation depends solely on faith and not at all on merit.<sup>46</sup>

It may be comprehensible enough that merits alone are not sufficient to guarantee restitution in immortality and the benefits of the Holy God. But that salvation depends solely on this act of faith and belief and on nothing else appears really scandalous, and that is precisely the message of the New Testament.<sup>47</sup>

What this occludes is that salvation is a product of divine action, God reconciling the world to himself in Christ (2 Cor. 5:19), and transforming those who place their faith in him by the power of the Spirit. This no doubt challenges common self-conceptions, but this effect is a corollary of the text's main focus on God acting in Christ. With this focus on salvation, Gadamer grapples with something approximating the message of the New Testament. Yet God is relegated deeply into the background of thinking about

40 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 3. This sense of secular differs from the others Taylor considers, namely, religion having an influence in the public square and what percentage of a population regularly attends worship services.

41 In this connection, note Gadamer's biographer's depiction of the role of the Christian religion in his life. As a child, Gadamer was exposed to the Pietist tradition through his mother, he retained sympathy throughout his life for traditional forms of Christianity, and he respected and even envied the Christian commitment of others. Yet he himself saw the truths in Christianity as pointing to something broader and more general. See Jean Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography* (Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 21–26. Gadamer's own account of his intellectual development contains a single brief reference to religion: Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Autobiographical Reflections", in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Northwestern Univ. Press, 2007), 3–38.

42 For instance, he sees that while religions typically express themselves via myths, in which there is nothing beyond the story being told, the New Testament depends on the work of witnesses to crucial events. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Religious and Poetical Speaking", in *Myth, Symbol, and Reality*, ed. Alan M. Olson (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 92.

43 Gadamer, "Religious and Poetical Speaking", 97.

44 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 367.

45 Gadamer, "Religious and Poetical Speaking", 96.

46 *Ibid.*, 96.

47 *Ibid.*, 96–97.



human salvation, which arguably reverses the priorities of the text itself.<sup>48</sup> In reading the New Testament, alternative self-conceptions confront the self, but the self does not directly encounter a divine Other.<sup>49</sup>

To conclude this section on Gadamer: the theological concepts to which he adverts stand for generic ideas; the concepts at the heart of his account of reading are not theological in the sense of referring to God; and his historicized account of interpretation pushes his readings of the New Testament toward a focus on possible human life stances, for which God serves as the remote backcloth. Reading, whether the text is the Christian Bible or any other work, necessarily involves a form of transcendence, namely transcendence in anthropological perspective.

The paradigmatic phenomenon is self-transcending, that is, the moving beyond where and what we are by what we do or what happens to us; the beyond is unspecified and merely indicates the direction in which we transcend or transgress our current position or context.<sup>50</sup>

To read is to see that one's own vantage point is not the only one that a human person could have. There is value here; however, there are limits to transcendence in anthropological perspective:

To be self-transcending and to be seized by something beyond oneself will never lead beyond the self but only produce another stage, mode, or character of the self. It is an immanent experience (an experience in Immanence) in one beyond oneself, which may, or may not, be interpreted religiously.<sup>51</sup>

Reading a classic text always challenges the reader's perspective. Yet Gadamer's view disallows anything more than a modicum of reference to divine transcendence, even when a reader is accessing a sacred text such as the New Testament.

The final section of this essay returns to Gadamer in order to highlight his major strength. But first we turn to Karl Barth.

### III.

Like Gadamer, Barth too has an account of interpretation, which includes many of the same points of focus. Barth offers a broadly applicable account of reading, insofar as he wants his reflections on biblical interpretation to serve as a paradigm for interpreting any text. "There is no such thing as a special biblical hermeneutics," he writes. "But we have to learn that hermeneutics which is alone and generally valid by means of the Bible as a witness of revelation."<sup>52</sup> Since the purpose of this paper is to explore biblical interpretation, this section concentrates on what Barth says about the Bible, without exploring the implications that this topic has for hermeneutics more broadly. In fact, the focus of this section is much sharper still. Limitations of space preclude providing a comprehensive depiction of Barth's treatment of biblical interpretation. What is important is how Barth serves as a counterpoint to Gadamer. This part of the essay highlights how theological language functions in Barth's account to impart a different orientation to the practice of reading. The drive of reading here is toward something more than just transcendence in anthropological perspective.

48 This should qualify and nuance William Schweiker's claim that Gadamer is doing theology here: William Schweiker, "Sacrifice, Interpretation, and the Sacred: The Import of Gadamer and Girard for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, no. 55 (1987): 803.

49 Gadamer also addresses religion in the following works: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics* (Yale Univ. Press, 1999), essays from his *Gesammelte Schriften* in which he enters into dialogue with major figures from the Western tradition; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Dialogues in Capri," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Polity Press, 1998), 200–11, in which he reflects on a colloquy where the participants, including Gadamer himself, attempt to navigate a way between refusing to see "in religion anything other than the deception or self-deception of human beings" and returning "to the doctrines of the [Christian] Church" (207). Walter Lammi characterizes well Gadamer's interest in examining religious phenomena when he says that his focus is characteristically on the reception of religious ideas. He does not dismiss the truth claims of religions, yet neither does he consider any of these claims actually to be true. See Lammi, *Gadamer and the Question of the Divine*, 7.

50 Ingolf U. Dalferth, "The Idea of Transcendence," in *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, ed. Hans Joas and Robert N. Bellah (Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), 168. Dalferth is not speaking about Gadamer specifically but is developing a notion he intends to apply broadly.

51 Dalferth, "The Idea of Transcendence," 168.

52 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God I.2: § 19–21* (T&T Clark, 2010), 466.

Interpretation takes a dialogical form in a genuine sense, yet the balance of voices within the dialogue is rather different for Barth — and this by virtue of the role theology plays in shaping the account. The brief exposition below takes *Church Dogmatics* I.2 as its basis, leaving aside almost completely questions about the development of Barth's thinking over time.

The place to begin is with the text. On Barth's view, what is the Bible? In brief, it is a witness to revelation. That Scripture serves as a witness means interpretation must concentrate on the subject matter of the text, as with Gadamer. This rules out assuming a certain posture toward the text:

To listen to a human word spoken to us does not mean only that we have cognition of the word as such. The understanding of it cannot consist merely in discovering on what presuppositions, in what situation, in what linguistic sense and with what intention, in what actual context, and in this sense with what meaning the other has said this or that.<sup>53</sup>

All this counts as preparatory work, necessary to but not the essence of attending to a text, if the text is truly a witness. "We can speak meaningfully of hearing a human utterance only when it is clear to us in its function of indicating something that is described or intended by the word, and also when this function has become an event confronting us, when therefore by means of the human word we ourselves in some degree perceive the thing described or intended."<sup>54</sup> That the Bible is a witness *to revelation* specifically creates a twofold relationship between the text and revelation, which designates God's act of disclosing himself in the person of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, the witness is not absolutely identical with that to which it bears witness.<sup>55</sup> John the Baptist is not Jesus Christ; the former draws attention to the latter, calling upon people to heed his voice. Likewise, the Bible is not itself God, yet by means of its words, readers encounter the triune Lord.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, precisely because of the text's indicative function, it is not finally separated from revelation: it is revelation as it comes to human beings. The text mediates revelation to readers and accommodates it to their understanding.<sup>57</sup>

Barth also factors into his treatment of reading some assumptions about readers as they engage with the event of revelation. In this delimited sense, he has a view of the reader.<sup>58</sup> While Barth takes a nuanced stance on general hermeneutics — not rejecting it, but instead asking for it to reform itself by modeling all understanding on the act of understanding Scripture — he unambiguously opposes thinking about the reader according to a general anthropology.<sup>59</sup> A general anthropology refers to an understanding of the human person that has no room for theology, or that does not make theology fundamental to its conception of the person. It would be insufficient, from Barth's point of view, to think of human beings as located within the history of the effects of classic works, which history of effects connects them to these works and facilitates interpretation. There is something Barth affirms here, yet it is certainly not a fully satisfying description of the reader. A key affirmation about the reader of the Bible follows from Barth's understanding of the distinctive subject matter of this text. The reader of the Bible stands before his Lord.<sup>60</sup> This means that interpreters should listen to what the Lord is saying,<sup>61</sup> in a sense to be unpacked under the next heading, interpretation.

The content of the Bible, and the object of its witness, is Jesus Christ as the name of the God who deals graciously with man the sinner. ... To hear this is to hear the Bible — both as a whole and in each one of its

53 Ibid., 464.

54 Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* I.2, 464–65.

55 Ibid., 463.

56 Ibid., 463.

57 Ibid., 463.

58 Barth would recoil from any suggestion that he develops his stance on reading on any sort of anthropological basis, and I do not mean to claim here that his thinking is anthropological. See the comments later in this paragraph on Barth's critique of general anthropology.

59 Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* I.2, 465–66.

60 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* I.1: § 8–12 (T&T Clark, 2009), 306.

61 Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* I.2, 700.

separate parts. Not to hear this means eo ipso not to hear the Bible, neither as a whole, nor therefore in its parts.<sup>62</sup>

Another crucial affirmation about readers is that, of themselves, qua human beings, they lack the capacity to understand revelation.<sup>63</sup> They can understand it if and only if they receive understanding as a gift from God, who confers it graciously upon them.

That readers must listen to the text means that they should subordinate their stock of prior understandings to its message. Barth is broadly similar to Gadamer in that he too thinks that interpreters lack content-neutral descriptive schemes; rather, they operate with frameworks that reflect features of their specific identity and particular historical location. In this connection, Barth quotes his nineteenth-century forebear Albrecht Ritschl, saying, “As we only hear with our own ears and see with our own eyes, we can apprehend by means only of our own understanding, not of that of another.”<sup>64</sup> So long as such prior conceptions do not fundamentally distort the text’s testimony — in which case they must simply be rejected — they factor into interpretation. The only question is how and to what degree. If reading means something more than parroting back the words of the text, as it certainly must,<sup>65</sup> then there is no such thing as an entirely passive interpreter. Yet the genuine freedom of interpreters, to be who they are, is a structured liberty. This freedom is determined first and foremost by its relation to the object of interpretation, that is, divine self-disclosure.<sup>66</sup> Readers are free to hear and respond to their Lord. They are present in such a response, which is active in the sense that *they* are taking in what the text has to say. Even as they listen, they make a contribution to what is heard by appropriating the text’s substance in a distinctive manner. Interpretation is dialogical, yet it cannot proceed as a dialogue among equals, because the reader stands to the *res* of the text as the disciple stands to his Lord.<sup>67</sup> Interpretation’s proper form is therefore subordination.

... To this testimony of their words we must subordinate ourselves — and this is the essential form of scriptural exegesis — with what we for our part hold to be true, beautiful, and good. ... The decisive point is that in scriptural exegesis Scripture itself as a witness to revelation must have unconditional precedence of all the evidence of our own being and becoming, our own thoughts and endeavours, hope and suffering, of all the evidence of intellect and sense, of all axioms and theorems, which we inherit and as such bear with us.<sup>68</sup>

These themes shine through in Barth’s reading of the prologue to John’s Gospel. His construal of the subject matter of the Bible takes the character of John the Baptist as a symbol for the function of all biblical texts.

More plainly than anywhere else in the Bible except in the parallel 1 John 1–4 ... we are told here what the Bible is, namely, witness to revelation both in relation to revelation and yet also in distinction from it. ... There is said in it by way of introduction something which has to be said by way of introduction to exposition of all biblical books as such: the great Yes and No with which these books call us to themselves only to point us to the Lord, as the Baptist pointed his disciples.<sup>69</sup>

Barth expounds the revelation to which the Fourth Gospel, and all of Scripture, bear witness with reference to a crucial term from the prologue, *logos* or word.

The word is the unassuming but incomparably true form in which people simply impart themselves, no more or no less, to others. By the Word God, too, imparts himself to us. ... In the simplicity and strictness, and precisely thus in the fulness of the Word, God reveals himself and has revealed himself.<sup>70</sup>

62 Ibid., 720.

63 Ibid., 697.

64 Ibid., 727.

65 Ibid., 718.

66 Ibid., 715.

67 Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God I.2*, 720.

68 Ibid., 718–19.

69 Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1: Lectures at Münster in 1925 and at Bonn in 1933* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 18.

70 Ibid., 26–27.

God discloses himself through the man Jesus Christ, whose story that Gospel narrates: he is the Word of God. Yet it is beyond the natural capacity of readers to grasp this subject matter, for, as Barth notes, the things of God are beyond their reach: “There is need to appeal for the assistance of grace,” the enlightening work of the Spirit, who allows for some genuine but limited comprehension.<sup>71</sup> Thus, theological categories specify the subject matter of the text and explicate how readers engage with it. It is also evident in the commentary, however, that Barth reads John’s Gospel with his own eyes, that is, in a way that reflects how he has been shaped by dialogue with specific commentators, both ancient and modern. Augustine’s fifth-century sermon series helps him to frame his whole interpretive endeavor,<sup>72</sup> and he adverts to his own contemporaries as well, such as Overbeck, who assists him in bringing both John the Baptist and John the apostle under the same heading of witness to revelation.<sup>73</sup> What Barth learns from them imparts a definite inflection to his reading.

This brief and very brief presentation of Barth’s view displays a possible approach to reading the Bible, one whose cogency depends upon on the acceptability of theology entering deeply into the workings of an account of reading.<sup>74</sup> It is not necessary to contend that Barth is ultimately correct to demonstrate that a phenomenology which sets theology to the side does not constitute the only possible approach to reading. Things look rather different when theological language is doing real work within the account. What Barth offers, over against Gadamer, is a model of interpretation oriented toward transcendence in theological perspective. “Here the transcending movement is not one of the self that moves beyond itself within the horizon of Immanence but rather of the Transcendent which occurs in what thereby becomes ‘the immanent horizon’ (Immanence).”<sup>75</sup> If this comparison is sound, it nevertheless remains reasonable to expect that Gadamer might have some insights to offer on the very point he stresses most, the inter-subjective component of interpretation. The following section makes the case that this is so.

#### IV.

The point that interpreters, and not only texts, have a historical location, and thus readers do not operate with content neutral interpretive schemes, is present in *Church Dogmatics* I.2, but *Truth and Method* develops this point far more robustly. It is at the core of what Gadamer is doing. For this reason, Gadamer had much greater influence on subsequent discussion of the issue. It is fitting that, when Nicholas Wolterstorff surveys recent developments in the culture of pluralistic Western universities, it is Gadamer he credits with demonstrating that all thinking takes place within a tradition of some kind.<sup>76</sup> There is precedent for this claim, beginning especially in the nineteenth century with Ritschl, whom Barth quotes, and others as well. But Gadamer develops this theme on a grand scale and drives it home so that it influenced those who come after him. Barth’s treatment of the topic does not have the same scope, and it seems, at least to many of his readers, to stand in a troubling level of tension with other claims that he makes. For instance, in his Romans commentary he asserts that nothing stands between the reader and the text, which speaks directly, seemingly without the need for any form of mediation at all.<sup>77</sup> It is from Gadamer, more than anyone else, that many today have learned that both text and reader have a contingent historical location, and that this counts as an advance over conceiving of the text alone as being situated while interpreters read according to universal rules, as generic human beings. This is a major step forward, in which Gadamer consolidates insights from Heidegger and the preceding tradition.<sup>78</sup>

71 Ibid., 1.

72 Ibid., 1–9.

73 Ibid., 14.

74 Cf. Hans Frei’s categorization of Barth here: Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 38–46.

75 Dalferth, “The Idea of Transcendence”, 170.

76 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the University* (Yale Univ. Press, 2019), 40–45.

77 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), 7.

78 On the connection between Heidegger and Gadamer, see Paul Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics”, in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009),



Gadamer's notion of tradition contains the potential to become plural, and in more recent work it has become pluralized. In expounding tradition, Gadamer discusses the Greek classics often, in rich detail, and with penetrating insight. Those in the West, or in Westernized contexts, live in the world they helped to create. Our consciousness reflects the influence of the Greek classics and the whole stock of Western great books. But Gadamer does not define the concept of tradition in a content-specific way. It stands for *any* factors that shape the horizon of the reader, even those that are difficult to pin down in definite terms. Its applicability is not limited to the tradition on which Gadamer mainly focuses. It can open up to include specific traditions beyond those Gadamer himself discusses. It is possible to shift from Tradition (the dominant voices of the West) to traditions (a more open notion).<sup>79</sup> For example, what about factors that influence interpretation for some readers but are not well represented in the stream of Western great books? What about gender? Sandra Schneiders uses Gadamer in a fairly systematic fashion — she is not just drawing on him in ad hoc way — and especially his stress on the locatedness of the reader to develop a feminist interpretation of the foot washing episode in John's Gospel.<sup>80</sup> Or, what about readers from other geographical contexts? The growing interest in readings of the Bible emerging from outside the West could well be taken as tacitly acknowledging the impact Gadamer has had in demonstrating that the reader's identity is integral to interpretation.

There is theological value in this plurality of prejudices. A multiplicity of descriptive schemes does better justice to transcendence in theological perspective than does a single scheme. Even when something that exceeds the immanent world is present to consciousness, any account of this presence permanently bears the mark of that immanent perspective. The immanent perspective provides a certain spin on it. It highlights certain things and leaves other features in comparative obscurity. The subject matter of the biblical text is inexhaustible and simply cannot be known by human beings in a comprehensive manner. But a multiplicity of readings, coming from readers with different interpretive schemes, will better represent the subject than one or only a few takes possibly could. The seer of Revelation imagines a vast multiplicity of people present in the *eschaton*:

I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. ...And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Revelation 7:9–10).

This variety of perspectives endures through to the end, and we certainly need it in the meantime, for it provides insights that discussions of a more restricted scope just cannot offer. This requires wrestling through whatever conflicts arise, but doing so is preferable to the alternative, assigning an unjustifiable interpretive privilege to one viewpoint. Because Gadamer's conceptuality is susceptible to pluralization, his thinking has value in explicating how many different descriptive schemes operate, even when readers apply those schemes to reading for the sake of transcendence in theological perspective.

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53–62.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Benjamin A. Edsall, *The Reception of Paul and Early Christian Initiation: History and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 258.

<sup>80</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Foot Washing (John 13:1–20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics", *Ex Auditu*, no. 1 (1985), 135n1, 136nn6–7, 137n12, and 143nn34, 36–37. Sarah Coakley uses Gadamer to discuss the possibility that there might be a specifically feminist understanding of aesthetics: Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 193–94.

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