1. Perhaps the most famous American challenge to the guild was Walter Wink's. Although this was true of much that emanated from the academy, it was balanced to some extent by the herculean efforts of some pastorally sensitive biblical scholars such as Paul Achtemeier, Raymond Brown, Walter Brueggemann, R. A. F. MacKenzie, Roland Murphy, Carolyn Osiek, Pheme Perkins, Carroll Stuhlmueller, Bruce Vawter, and many others, to make the results of historical-critical exegesis available to and assimilable by clergy and laity.

2. The most universal faith affirmation about the Bible is that it is the "word of God!" This affirmation grounds the central importance attributed to this book by the Christian community and the endless efforts of religiously committed scholars and preachers to interpret it and to proclaim its contents. Around the expression "word of God" clusters a collection of interrelated theological terms such as revelation, inspiration, authority, inerrancy, and normativity that are understood in radically different ways by believers in various traditions. The task of this chapter is to explore the meaning of the expression "word of God" as applied to the Christian sacred scriptures in general and the New Testament in particular and to use the meaning thereby established to clarify the related theological terms in the hope that this clarification will ground and justify the approach to New Testament hermeneutical theory that this study proposes.

A. The Linguistic Expression "Word of God": A Metaphor

"Word of God" is first of all a linguistic expression. Before taking up the question of what the expression refers to it is necessary to reflect on its character as language, that is, on the kind of linguistic reality it is. The expression "word of God" does not, of course, refer to a single word uttered by God but to intelligible discourse, to language or discourse attributed to God. Our question, then, is about what kind of linguistic reality an expression like "God's speaking" or "God's speaking" really is.

Despite the widespread insistence to the contrary that biblical fundamentalism represents, it seems evident that word of God or divine discourse cannot be taken literally. First, words (whether taken singly or functioning in discourse) are intelligible physical sounds emitted by the vocal apparatus (or some substitute for that apparatus) of a rational creature or, by extension, some auditory or visual...
representation of those utterances. Language, in other words, is a human phenomenon rooted in our corporeality as well as in our discursive mode of intellect and as such cannot be literally predicated of pure spirit. Just as we cannot say that an expression such as "God sees our thoughts" is a literal statement, because God does not have eyes and thoughts are not the kind of entities that reflect physical light and can therefore be seen, so we cannot say that God literally speaks.

But there is a second reason, perhaps less obvious but even more important, why we cannot literally attribute language to God, namely, the noncommensurability of the essentially limited reality of language with the infinite God. Anyone who has struggled to put into words profound feeling or complex thought has personally experienced the finite character of language. It is not simply that we are limited in our capacity to use language; language itself is limited.

One indication of the limitation of language is the polyvalent character of words. Words, in order to have real meaning as opposed to a certain ambiguous indicative potentiality, have to be placed in context in order to be specified sufficiently to communicate at all. And even in context they often remain somewhat ambiguous.

Another indication of the limitation characteristic of language is the fact that no language is fully translatable. All translation involves making choices that specify the meaning of the original text in ways that never exactly correspond to or fully capture the meaning of the original. There is no perfect correspondence between any two languages because each is limited by its own cultural, historical, and other socially determined peculiarities.

A third indication that language is limited is the fact that words change in meaning over time. This happens not merely because speakers are capricious or unskilled in the use of language but because human experience, which comes to expression in language, changes. Part of the extraordinary power of language as a, if not the, distinctively human characteristic is the virtually infinite flexibility of its very limited material resources, the capacity of the same limited vocabulary and grammar to bring to expression the incredible range and quality of human experience. But despite this marvelous flexibility it remains frustratingly true that the most important things we have to communicate can never find fully adequate expression in language; thus we repeat and expand and explain and reexpress in the never-ending effort to finally say what we really mean.

For both of the above reasons, namely the corporeal rootedness and the essential limitation of language, we have to say that our attribution of language to God cannot be understood literally. God is infinite, and God is spirit. Language is a finite corporeal-discursive operation. It is the most characteristic and elevated achievement of our humanity as intelligent life, so it is fitting that we use our most amazing capacity and attainment in our understanding of God. But we play that process false when we understand the attribution literally and, rather than recognizing our likeness to God, circumscribe God by human limitations.

For many people, the only alternative to understanding the expression "word of God" literally is to understand it as pure fancy, as radically untrue and therefore ultimately meaningless. They think that if God does not literally speak then we have no meaningful cognitive contact with God. Such is emphatically not the case. The expression "word of God" is a metaphor, and metaphor is perhaps our most powerful use of language, our most effective access to the meaning of reality at its deepest levels.

Metaphor's bad reputation among people with a thirst for reality comes from centuries of understanding metaphor according to a purely rhetorical model. Contemporary linguistic and literary theorists, realizing that this understanding of metaphor as a mere rhetorical device does not and cannot account for the tremendous power of metaphorical discourse, have developed a semantic model of metaphor that allows us to grasp the inner dynamics of this marvellous linguistic phenomenon.

Let us begin by saying what metaphor is not. First, true metaphor is not merely a contracted simile, that is, a comparison in which the connectives like or as have been suppressed for rhetorical effect. Second, metaphor is not simply a literary ornament, a decoration of speech that makes it more aesthetically pleasing, more interesting, or more convincing. Third, metaphor is not merely an illustration by which we make something that is difficult to understand because of its abstract quality a little more accessible by means of a concrete example. And finally, metaphor is not a substitute for a literal expression that can be restored to the discourse once the metaphor's meaning is understood thereby suppressing the need for the metaphor. This latter point means that genuine metaphor is not translatable into literal meaning. All of these denials belong to the basic contention that genuine metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device. Metaphor, as we shall see, is an instrument of new meaning, a way of achieving genuine semantic innovation.

One more negative statement about metaphor, on a completely different level, is very important. For reasons to be discussed shortly, real metaphors are very unstable linguistic entities. They exist in and even as linguistic tension involving a simultaneous affirmation and negation of the likeness between the two terms of the metaphor. The metaphor contains an "is" and an "is not;" held in irresolvable tension. But tension, like ambiguity, always has a tendency to resolution, to suppression of the tension. Metaphors, which are tensive language, tend to either banalization or literalization.

A true metaphor is banalized when it has been repeated often enough that it loses its capacity to surprise, to tease the imagination into the engagement of new possibilities. Most live metaphors eventually die. Some simply become part of the lexical polysemy of the word. For example, referring to that strangely elusive silver-white metallic element that is liquid at ordinary temperatures as "mercury" was originally metaphorical. Now the second dictionary meaning of mercury, following its primary meaning as the name of the swift Roman messenger god, is the
metabolic element. In fact, most people probably think of the metal before they think of either the god Mercury or the planet named after him.

Other metaphors never become part of the dictionary meaning; they simply become trite. To speak of looking into the depths of someone's eyes is to use a trite metaphor. Everyone knows, of course, that physical human eyes are not literally deep. The metaphor is not a literal description but an evocation of the psychological experience of intimacy that meeting and holding another's gaze can occasion. But we have become so familiar with the application of the metaphor of depth in this case that it no longer gives rise to that tension between meanings that constitutes the power of live metaphor.

A much more dangerous way of resolving the tension of true metaphor is to literalize it. To literalize the metaphor is to suppress its negative pole, that about it that "is not," and to affirm only the positive pole, that about it that "is." But when we do this, the literalized metaphor goes underground and works on the subconscious level creating vast reservoirs of cognitive untruth and distorted affectivity.

For example, the expression "God is our Father" is a powerful metaphor. To be a father, literally, is to cooperate in the generation of a human offspring by sexual intercourse with a woman. (Insects and/or animals are regarded as "parents" by extension of the human relationship to sexual reproduction on other levels.) Obviously, God is not a male being, does not engage in sexual intercourse, and does not produce human offspring. We recognize this by saying that God is our adoptive father rather than our biological father. (This, however, is just as metaphorical as calling God our "father?" But even though we know that God is not literally our male parent, either biologically or by legal process, the metaphor of divine fatherhood has been so literalized by many people that they are profoundly shocked by the use of feminine parental metaphors for God. This is not the place to detail the cognitive confusion and affective distortion to which such literalization gives rise, but anyone who has dealt with these effects in the spiritual life of believers knows that a literalized metaphor is by no means simply dead. Literalized metaphor is the cancer of the religious imagination, powerfully and pathologically at work.

So far I have said what metaphor is not. It is necessary now to try to say what metaphor is. Understood according to a semantic rather than a rhetorical model, metaphor appears as a phenomenon not of denomination (a transfer of the meaning of one word to another word) but as a phenomenon of predication (an expansion of meaning itself). Classical rhetorical theory located the metaphorical phenomenon at the level of words. By applying to one word something that belonged properly to another word, one embellished discourse and thus made it more pleasing and/or persuasive. As Ricoeur, following contemporary literary theorists, points out, the true metaphorical process takes place not at the level of words but only at the level of the sentence. A metaphor is a proposition that, if taken literally, is absurd. At the literal level it is meaning-less. The proposition seems to "make sense" in that it is a grammatically integral sentence, but the mind stumbles before the proposed reference. It is not simply a false statement like "Cats are canines." It is unable to deliver meaning, false or true. By the very fact that it obviously intends meaning (because its propositional structure is intact) but is literally absurd, it forces the mind into action to find meaning at another level. But the new meaning is not just another literal meaning in place of the first (which was absent). It is a different kind of meaning, an opening on a realm of significance that cannot be expressed literally but engages the imagination in a cognitive and affective exploration of the subject in and through relationships that seem strange but, in fact, are more illuminating than literal predication.

The dynamics of metaphor are constituted by the tension established between the two interpretations: the literal, which is absurd, and the metaphorical, which struggles to emerge into clarity at another level. A few paragraphs back I said that the literalized metaphor is a cancer of the imagination. Literally speaking, cancer is a physical pathology. To predicate it of the imagination is absurd at the literal level. But the sentence is not devoid of meaning that immediately begins to work, to struggle toward clarity. The metaphor carries hints of silent evil, of deadly life-gone-wild. It evokes fear and revulsion. It breathes bleak hopelessness, foreboding agony and death. I could have described more literally a literalized metaphor. Indeed, a little earlier, I did so. But the quasi-literal description in terms of the suppression of linguistic tension did not really convey the difference between a metaphor that is simply dead (that is, one that is just no longer effective) and a literalized metaphor (that is, one that no longer functions metaphorically but continues to function in powerfully distorting ways). The metaphorical description opened the meaning in a way literal description not only did not do, but could not do. We resort to metaphor not to be linguistically clever but in the effort to bring to expression that which cannot be brought to expression in literal speech.

As was mentioned above, metaphors, because their power derives from the tension between the two interpretations, are unstable. The metaphor lives in the struggle between the "is" of the predication and the "is not" that the recognition of literal absurdity insinuates immediately into our perception. If either the "is" or the "is not" is suppressed, the metaphor is undone. If one suppresses the "is," one debilitates the metaphor, rendering it ineffectual. If one suppresses the "is not" one literalizes it. In the first case, the metaphor is seen as an exercise of sheer fancy, a mere illustration of some sort; in the second, it begins its deadly work in the imagination, distorting both cognition and affectivity. The metaphor only stays alive and healthy, enriching the imagination with meaning by its simultaneous engagement of cognitive and affective energy, if the tension can be maintained between the "is" and the "is not." This usually happens because, on the one hand, the mind can find no literal way to express something that demands...
expression and, on the other hand, the metaphor is so resistant to translation that neither the "is" nor the "is not" can be suppressed without causing a cognitive and affective discomfort that is less tolerable than the tension of the metaphor.

Most metaphors are eventually banalized; that is, they die. Some become trite and dull through repetition. Some become part of the polysemy of the language's words. But some metaphors do not die. They have a kind of perennial power to evoke response. They seem to be an inexhaustible source of semantic innovation, an endless reservoir of significance. They generate new metaphors that cluster around and enrich them and draw vitality from them. Theorists have coined the term 'root metaphor' for these extraordinarily enduring and powerful tensive images. A root metaphor is one that, like the root system of a tree in relation to the nutrients in the soil, draws together in a living synthesis diverse cognitive and affective elements and nourishes ever new growth in meaning. The expression "reign of God;' as Sally McFague has so well explained, is such a root metaphor. She is probably right in saying that it is the root metaphor of the Christian experience, that is, the central and coordinating metaphor for the immensely rich and complex reality of our personal and communal relationship with God in its past, present, and future dimensions.

The expression we are considering, "Sacred scripture is the word of God;' is also a root metaphor. As we will see, it is the central and organizing image for the richly complex reality of divine revelation that we must consider in detail below. This amounts to saying that to claim, as we just have, that the expression "word of God" is not literal but metaphorical by no means robs the term of semantic density. It means, rather, that the reference of the term is not to literal divine speech but to the immensely more significant reality of divine revelation, which is certainly not restricted to the confines of human language.

Before moving on to a consideration of the real referent of the metaphor "word of God;' namely, revelation, it is necessary to say a word about the effects of suppressing the metaphorical tension of this particular expression. There are those for whom the metaphor "word of God" is dead. They may affirm that the scriptures are the word of God, but in fact, the expression is for them simply a reversional synonym for the Bible, which is for them basically a book like other religious books. Whether as Christians they encounter it in proclamation or as scholars they devote themselves to its exegesis, the designation of what they are dealing with as "word of God" does not fire their imaginations with reverent wonder. The "is" of the metaphor has ceased to function for them.

For others, the metaphor has become literalized. They have ceased to hear the whispered "is not" that a live metaphor always carries in its affirmation. For them, the scriptures are literally God's discourse, human language (the only kind of language there is) predicated literally of God. Several consequences follow from this failure to maintain the metaphor's tension. First, such people must regard each and every word of the scriptures as equally and fully divine and thus absolutely true. Interpretation is reduced to an ascertaining of the literal meaning of the words in their written context, since, presumably, God used language perfectly to express the divine meaning. The impasses to which this leads, the absurdity of the truth claims that must be made for patent human errors in the text, are too well known to require repetition here. Nor are these problems really solved by appeal to a so-called sacrificium intellectus that amounts to "recognizing" as divine wisdom what even humans know is not true.

Second, literalizing the metaphor creates the insoluble problem of double causality at the same level. In order to maintain the immediate linguistic causality of God, the literalist must reduce the human author to a passive instrument, a scribe taking dictation from the divine speaker. This contention is extremely difficult to reconcile with the well-established fact that most of the biblical books, if not all, were composed over a period of time (sometimes centuries) under the literary influence of more than one person. And it is impossible to reconcile with the fact that the biblical texts carry irrefutable evidence of the very human character of their composition. This evidence appears not only in stylistic idiosyncrasies but also in an irrecusable theological pluralism in regard to even the most important matters of faith and morals, in the slow development of the Judeo-Christian moral vision, and in the historical and scientific errors and outright contradictions that cannot be eradicated or harmonized by ingenious exegesis.

By far the most serious effect of literalizing the metaphor "word of God" is that it impoverishes and distorts the mystery of divine revelation. If the Bible is literally God's discourse, then revelation means primarily, if not exclusively, propositional communication by God, and faith means primarily intellectual assent to the content of these propositions. As we will see below, divine revelation is a far richer reality, a far more personal and engaging encounter between God and humanity than can be suggested or captured by such notions. As we noted above, the literalized metaphor wreaks havoc on the religious imagination. It petrifies and renders sterile the field of understanding, substituting the procrustean bed of rigid categories for the warm soil of loving and perspicacious attention to reality.

In summary, then, the affirmation "Scripture is the word of God" is a metaphor. There is profound significance in the assertion but only if we hear, in the assertion itself, the small still voice of the "is not." Literally speaking, scripture as language consists of human words and only human words. As such they are limited and require interpretation, just as all human language does. But this human word, as we will see, is the symbolic locus of divine revelation, and this is why it is true (but not literal) to affirm that this book is indeed (metaphorically) the word of God.

B. The Referent of 'Word of God': Symbolic Revelation

Having examined the expression "word of God" at the linguistic level and recognized it as a metaphor, we are in a position to inquire after the referent of this
expression, the complex field of meaning to which the metaphor points and about
which it stimulates us to think Knowing that we are dealing with a metaphor,
indeed, a root metaphor, we will expect its referent to be not a single or simple
object but a whole complex of meaning, a rich semantic field whose significance
constantly overflows the boundaries of our reflection and our language. That is
exactly what we do find, for the referent of "word of God" is divine revelation,
God's accepted self-gift to human beings.

It is essential for an understanding of revelation to resist the insinuation of the
simplistic imagination that wants to equate revelation with the imparting of other-
wise unavailable information. Revelation, as we shall see, does have a noetic
dimension, but that is not its defining characteristic and certainly not the place to
start an examination of the subject. Personal revelation, even in the human order,
is first and foremost self-disclosure. A person chooses to invite another into her
or his interiority. But unless the other accepts the invitation and reciprocates,
revelation does not achieve itself. It aborts, and never without anguish. Reveala-
tion, although one person may initiate it, is necessarily a mutual experience of
personal disclosure giving rise to a mutual treasuring of what has been shared, for
the "what" is really a "who." The purpose and result of revelation is shared life
characterized by irrevocable commitment. In other words, revelation is mutual
self-gift expressive of and terminating in love. Jesus said to his disciples, "I do not
call you servants . . . but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). [emphasis mine].

The notion of revelation always connotes both cognitive content and linguistic
form. This is not because revelation is primarily a matter of intellectual knowl-
edge or always achieved by verbalization. It is because of the mysterious nature
of human language as the paradigmatic mode of the gift of self. It is interesting
that in scripture sexual intercourse (which might seem to be the primary mode of
self-gift) is referred to as "conversing" and "knowing" rather than vice versa. In
other words, the most radical form of entering into and receiving another is not
physical copulation but that mutual interiority that is achieved in true communica-
tion. Our primary mode of communication is language.

One of Martin Heidegger's great contributions to contemporary thought was
his exploration of the mysterious reality of human language, of the word. He
challenged the spontaneous and unreflective assumption that language is essen-
tially a system of conventional labels that we apply to various parts of reality and
then move about as linguistic counters in our efforts to communicate what we
know to one another. He called language the "house of being," the place where
being comes into the open in self-disclosure. Following Heidegger, the New Her-
meneutics insisted that we do not really understand language; rather, we understand
through language. Language is not so much the object of our knowing as the
medium of our encounter with the real. Human language is so intimately bound
up with being that it can even become transparent to the divine being, becoming
a medium of encounter with God. What these thinkers appreciated in a new way
is the symbolic rather than mechanical or technical nature of human language.

Language is used for self-expression before it is used for the communication of
neutral information. We speak, first and foremost, to bring ourselves into the
light. There is truly a world of difference between the way we know another by
sight and the way we know by hearing. To see another is to encounter a person's
"surface" to "stand before" or "be in the presence of" another, But speaking/hearing
(the one always implies the other) is a mutual entering into interiority. By
speaking/hearing, two persons open the walls surrounding their inner selves, and
their heretofore incommunicable experiences are put in common. They both now
live in a different world, a world they share, rather than in two separate worlds.
They now share a common life born of communication. Speaking/hearing, espe-
cially that which takes place in intimate conversation, is not primarily the transfer
of information but the mutual gift of selves. It is, then, not at all difficult to see
why language is the paradigmatic model for understanding divine revelation. How-
ever, if the model is not to become rigid and thus distorting we must resolutely resist
the spontaneous tendency to think of language as a system of verbal labels. Language
is, in reality, the primary instance of symbolic activity, and this is the source of
its power to reveal. Therefore, to understand the mysterious process of revelation,
that is of mutual self-gift, we must reflect on the nature and meaning of symbol.

It must be realized that a symbol is not merely a sign, that is, an indicator of
something that is other than itself, like an exit sign pointing to a door or a label
identifying an object. Nor is a symbol a stand-in, a substitute, for an absent
reality like a promissory note representing a future payment. A symbol is, rather,
the mode of presence of something that cannot be encountered in any other way.
The body, as a person's way of being present, is a prime instance of symbol. It
focuses our attention on several important notes of the symbol, the most obvious
of which is perceptibility. Whether a symbol appeals directly to the senses or is an
idea or image in the mind, it is essentially a perceptible reality that mediates
what is otherwise imperceptible.

Second, a symbol does not symbolize in a vacuum but only in interaction with
an interpreter who thereby encounters the reality being symbolized. This
accounts for the peculiarly involving character of the symbol. We cannot, once
something has become symbolically present to us, not respond. Even refusing to
respond is a kind of response. Once we are aware of another body, for example,
we must situate ourselves in relation to the person so presented. We can greet the
person, make love to the person, attack, ignore, or murder the person. But we
cannot not be implicated in his or her active presence to us. The symbol is active
presence calling for interactive response.

Third, a symbol, unlike a sign, which is a separate entity standing for some-
thing other than itself, participates directly in the presence and power of that
which it symbolizes. It does not stand between the symbolized and the interpreter as something that must be "overcome" or "passed beyond"; rather, it mediates the symbolized to the interpreter. The symbol never exhausts the reality, that is, it never expresses it fully, but it is so intimately bound up in the symbolized that there is no way to separate them. This is dramatically evident in the case of the human body, the symbol of the person. What is done to the person's body is done to the person. Furthermore, when a person no longer presents him- or herself in the body, not only is the person no longer present to us but the body itself is trans-symbolized. It becomes a corpse. It has become the mode of presence of an absence. That is why a corpse always evokes intense emotion. It is symbolic material torn loose from its existential roots. It is a voiceless address, the stare of blind eyes, but it is emphatically not a mere empty shell, a label torn off its product.

Fourth, the symbol embodies and thereby brings to expression reality that it can never fully "say." The symbol is like a pinpoint of starlight shining out of the vast blackness of the sky that is its background and within which it is enmeshed in an endless network of invisible planetary existence. Because the symbol is always a minuscule "saying" emerging from the vast background of the "unsaid" it is always ambiguous, always concealing infinitely more than it reveals. One consequence of this ambiguity of symbols is that they require interpretation, yet no interpretation is ever complete, exhaustive, or adequate. We are sometimes certain that an interpretation is wrong but seldom absolutely confident that one is right. The symbol always invites to new and deeper and more adequate encounters with the real, new because our own development puts us in touch, through the symbol, with different aspects of the reality it is trying, with ever-ambiguous success, to bring to expression. Human presence in and through the body is a clear instance of this characteristic of the symbol. The roots of the symbol reach deeply into the unfathomable abyss of personal existence, but its flowers are so small and fragile and fleeting that they give us only a glimpse, a tantalizing scent of the real. We never definitively "know" another. The more deeply we communicate, the more we discover there is to know.

Symbols, then, are the bringing to expression of being in individual beings. They are the locus of our encounter with the real. Although symbolism is most perfectly realized in human beings and their expressive behavior, it is important to remember that it is not limited to human expressiveness. People have always experienced nature itself as powerfully symbolic. Light and darkness, earth and sky, the four cardinal directions, the rotating of the seasons, sun and moon and stars in their endless procession across the sky, height and depth and length and breadth, the sea and the dry land, fecundity, animals, birth and death, and all the other great realities of the cosmos speak to us humans of powers greater than ourselves and of the structure and meaning of human life.

History also is symbolic. History is not just a collection of inert facts, things that have happened. History is the human story, causally understood and narratively constructed. We tell it as a story precisely because we experience it as meaningful and symbolic. Our personal and communal history speaks to us of identity, worth, and destiny. We interpret what we experience, both what we do and what we suffer, as a kind of script, a play in which we see ourselves acting a brief but important role.

At the center and intersection of nature and history stands the human being in and through whose interpretive activity being achieves meaning. Nothing is truly symbolic unless it is interpreted, unless its meaning is grasped in understanding. The human being is a symbolic animal not only because we create symbols to express ourselves but also because it is in our interpreting that all of reality becomes truly expressive. Language is our highest form of symbol making as well as our most refined instrument of interpretation. It is the medium of both understanding and expression, and therefore it is not surprising that we metaphorically attribute speech to anything we experience as symbolic. We say that nature speaks to us, history teaches us; we speak of body language, of deafening silence, of eloquent looks. Language is the appropriate metaphor for the expressiveness of being encountered in and through interpretation.

We are now in a position to appreciate why divine revelation, God's self-gift to us, is necessarily symbolic and why we spontaneously express our experience of it through the metaphor of human speech. God, divine being, is infinitely intelligible and meaningful. The Jewish scriptures express this in the feminine image of divine wisdom who is the very expression of God, with God and equal to God from the very beginning and at work in all of creation (Prov. 8:22-31). The New Testament also affirms through the image of the preexistent Word that God comes to expression in the depths of divinity from all eternity and that that divine self-expression became human, that is, symbolically present among us, in the course of time (John 1:1-18). But these metaphorical affirmations of God's eternal self-expression are actually theological conclusions arrived at through reflection not on God as self-subsistent Spirit but on the God who has become accessible to us through revelation.

To be accessible to us, to invite us into divine intimacy, God had to approach us symbolically, that is, in and through perceptible reality. God had to achieve symbolic self-disclosure, thereby opening a locus of encounter between divinity and humanity. From earliest times human beings have interpreted nature as God's way of being present to us, as a divine gift in which the Giver could be discerned and encountered. The Israelites deepened and gave theological expression to this view of nature, including humanity, as theophanic in the doctrine of creation. Their preferential recourse to the metaphor of speech rather than to that of sight is significant. For the Jews, God was personal, and revelation was not primarily a display of neutral power witnessed by humans but an invitation to communion of life that people could freely accept. So they described God as creating everything by speaking (Gen. 1:1-2:3), thus imbuing all nature with the message of
divine love. The heavens declared the glory of God; the seas thundered the divine majesty; the earth sang the praises of God's beauty and bounty (see Ps. 19, 104, and elsewhere). All of nature was "voiced" because it was God's way of speaking to the people.

The Israelites, however, made a highly original advance in symbolic interpretation. They understood their own history as a story of the relationship between themselves and God. God rescued them from slavery, made a covenant with them, gave them a land, and protected them from their enemies. Torah, the covenant Law that the people freely accepted, was not a penal code but a laying out of the coordinates of a new world, a world of shared life between God and this special people. So the Law, the symbolic place of divine self-disclosure, was recognized as preeminently God's word (see, e.g., Ps. 119, Deut. 32:44 47, and elsewhere).

The Israelites also heard God speaking in the oracles of prophets, in the prayers of priests and people, in the ordinances of kings, and in the wisdom of sages, in all the forms of human discourse that gave voice to God's intimate presence and self-disclosure in their midst. Temple and cult had a special role to play in bringing to effective expression the relationship between God and Israel. And when, over many centuries, the Jews committed their religious experience to writing, reinterpreting over and over again the symbolic expressions of theft life with God, they regarded this collection of books as God's word, not because it was the only locus of divine-human encounter, the only place where God "spoke": but because it recalled to them, and interpreted for them, the myriad ways that God in the past had entered into their lives. Thus it became a source of illumination of present experience as continuously revelatory and an assurance of future encounter.

Part of the Jewish experience of divine revelation was the messianic expectation that there was still to come the full and final revelation in which nature, history, and the people itself would be integrated into an eschatological dispensation of everlasting peace and prosperity. It was the group of Jews who were eventually to be known as Christians who recognized in Jesus of Nazareth the promised messiah and in his paschal mystery the inauguration of messianic times. They interpreted his life and teaching, and especially his death and resurrection, as the full and definitive revelation of God. They came to see him as the very presence of God, the ultimate symbolic expression of God, who not only invited humanity to share in divine life but who came in person to share human life. The proclamation, and eventually the committing to writing in the New Testament, of all that was experienced in and through Jesus was an integral part of the experience itself and made the revelatory experience available to those who came after. Indeed, the very life of the community constituted by the indwelling of the Spirit of the risen Jesus became the locus of continued and renewed encounter with him and through him with God.

The root metaphor "word of God" embraces and integrates this whole range of divine self-giving, of God's symbolic self-disclosure and sharing of life. Creation, Israel's covenant history, prophetic oracle, sapiential discourse, apocalyptic vision, Torah and cult, the Jewish scriptures, the person and mission of Jesus, the proclamation of the Gospel, the New Testament, the ongoing life of the Christian community—all are part of the great mystery of God's self-gift, that is, of divine revelation. Because revelation is the gift of self, something that we humans realize most fully through linguistic communication, the best way we have to evoke it is to speak of God "conversing" with us. Indeed we call Jesus, understood as the definitive self-gift of God, the Word of God incarnate. This is equivalent to calling him the great symbol of God, the locus of symbolic revelation. The root metaphor "word of God" derives its perennial life and immense power from the fact that it is the linguistic evocation of the reality of symbolic revelation.

The referent of the metaphor "word of God" is, then, a complex reality much broader than the written scriptures. Indeed, for the Christian the primordial referent of the term is Jesus himself, because all other symbolic forms of the divine self-gift find their integrating reference point in him. They are either preparation for or witness to him. However, it is easy to see why the metaphor "word of God" tends to be not only virtually equated with sacred scripture but literalized when so applied, whereas it retains its metaphorical tension when applied to creation, sacred history, or Jesus. Scripture is literally composed of words; it is human discourse. Furthermore, we regard it as a privileged locus of divine self-revelation that is most readily understood according to the model of human self-revelation in language. To call the scriptures God's word (a metaphor) in human words (a literal attribution) leads very easily to thinking of God's self-gift (revelation) as literal speech. We have already attended to the problems that literalization of the metaphor causes. But one other effect of failing to maintain the metaphorical tension of the expression "word of God" when it is applied to scripture is that it tends to obscure the full range of the reality of divine revelation. Scripture becomes the exclusive locus of revelation and finally is simply equated with divine revelation.

Just as we must say that sacred scripture is (and is not) the word of God, so we cannot say that the Bible is, purely and simply, revelation. It is more correct to say that the Bible is (potentially) revelatory than to say that it is revelation. Scripture is a privileged witness to the divine self-gift that has been taking place from the moment of creation and will continue until the end of time. But it is symbolic witness, and that means that it becomes the actual locus of divine-human encounter only in the act of interpretation. This interpretation will always be an arduous task because symbols are inherently and invincibly ambiguous, simultaneously revealing and concealing.

Furthermore, the text cannot be interpreted except within the context of the whole reality of the word of God. The text, for reasons we will discuss later, has a privileged position in this vast and rich complex, but it is not, in abstraction
from the total reality of revelation, the word of God. Even the risen Christ, the Word of God incarnate, could not interpret himself and his paschal mystery to his disillusioned disciples except against the background of the Jewish scriptures as witness to the whole revelation experience of Israel (Luke 24:13-35). Peter and the other apostles could not proclaim the Easter Gospel without recourse to that same background (e.g., Acts 2:1-36). So, too, for the Christian of today, the New Testament in isolation is not purely and simply the word of God. It is a privileged locus of divine encounter only when it is interpreted as an integral part of the whole mystery of God's historical self-gift to humanity.

C. The Bible as Word of God: Sacrament

Probably the most frequent use of the expression "word of God" is in reference to the Bible itself, that is, to the written text. Preachers who have just read a passage from the Bible proclaim, "This is the word of the Lord," or, "Here ends the reading of the word of God," and their listeners respond with an acclamation of praise and thanksgiving. Often enough, at this point in a liturgical celebration the book of the scriptures itself is elevated for veneration by the faithful. Furthermore, in some Christian communions after the book itself is venerated it is enthroned in a special place and honored with such marks of reverence as lighted candles and incense. Our question at this point concerns the relationship between the Bible itself and the reality designated by the expression "word of God."

This question is actually twofold. The Bible refers both to the written text as meaningful language and to the book itself, that is, the physical object composed of this text. The term word of God, as we have just noted, is used in reference to both, and we must therefore raise the question of whether either or both usages are appropriate and, if so, in what sense.

Let us attend first of all to the Bible as meaningful written text (as scripture), in contradistinction to the Bible as physical object (as book). Vatican I declared that "the Church has always honored scripture "as it venerates the Body of the Lord" in the Eucharist. 12 Although this statement, at least in respect to the Roman communion, is more descriptive of what the Church should have done than what it actually has done throughout most of its history, it provides us with a very useful model for understanding the nature of the Bible as sacred text. Scripture, like Eucharist, is best understood as sacrament.

Sacraments, if we follow the theology of Saint Augustine, are a particular kind of symbol They are symbols that are peculiarly effective in mediating the divine-human encounter (i.e., in theological terms, grace), or some aspect thereof, because they are especially explicit and expressive. They articulate the mystery with extraordinary clarity and power This is so partly because of the symbolic material itself (the words and actions involved) and partly because the Christian community, on the basis of these rites' close association with the person and ministry of the historical Jesus, has established them as privileged symbols of the presence and power of the risen Lord. Thus, while not entirely relieved of their ambiguity as symbols, they have a clarity and transparency for the community that other religious symbols do not have. They are recognized everywhere in the community, and they mediate the mystery in ways that can be fairly universally understood.

Precisely because of their explicitness and the clarity of our formulations about them sacraments are open to certain misunderstandings and misuses that do not so readily affect other religious symbols. We will attend to this problem in due course, but for the moment it suffices to note that sacraments are symbols in use in the Christian community that, in bringing certain aspects of the Christian mystery to articulation, tend to stabilize and even localize as well as to clarify our experience of the mystery.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the body of Christ. "Body of Christ" is a metaphor whose postresurrection referent is the Church, the community of believers who corporately make the risen Christ symbolically present and active in this world between the ascension (the end of Jesus' historical presence among his disciples) and the parousia (Jesus' return in glory at the end of time) This mystery of Christ's presence and action is symbolically realized in all of the saving actions of the community but is most clearly and powerfully articulated in that sacramental action in which the community comes together (becomes corporate) to do explicitly that which all of its action is in reality: thanking God in the Spirit for the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ and commitment to extending that salvation to the ends of the earth by doing in memory of Jesus what Jesus did for us, namely, laying down our lives for those we love. Thus, the term eucharist really designates the entire saving action of the Christian community as body of Christ. But the Eucharist, the community's liturgical self-expression as worshiping and ministering body of Christ, has a peculiar power to bring this mystery to full and explicit articulation.

Sacred scripture is the sacrament of the word of God. As we have seen, the real referent of the metaphor "word of God" is the entire mystery of divine revelation, God's received self-gift to us in and through such symbols as creation, sacred history, Jesus himself, and the life of the believing community. In all of these ways God "speaks" to us. However, this divine self-communication is most explicitly and powerfully articulated when the scripture is read (interpreted and understood), especially when this is done by public proclamation reverently attended to in the context of the community's liturgical action. This is not to say that the reading of scripture is the only or even the most important instance of divine revelation, any more than we can say that the Eucharist is the only or even the most important realization of the presence and action of Christ in the world. To say that the biblical text (as read and understood) is the sacrament of the word of God is to say that this mystery here comes to articulation with a clarity and transparency that focuses our attention on the mystery of divine revelation and
thus fosters our attentiveness to the word of God wherever we encounter it. Just as it is futile, indeed sinful, to participate in the Eucharist if one fails to "discern the body of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:29) in the Christian community, so it is futile, and at least irreverent in the extreme, to proclaim or listen to scripture if one is deaf to the word of God in one's life.

Let us turn now to our second question concerning the Bible as word of God, namely, how the expression applies to the book itself, the physical object composed of the scriptural text. H.-G. Gadamer, in talking about the mode of being of art, supplies a very useful model for understanding the Bible as the word of God, one to which we will return in chapter 5. Gadamer distinguishes between the art object and the work of art. An art object is a physical entity like a statue, a painting, a musical score, or the script of a play. The art object is only truly a work of art when it is being contemplated, heard, or played. In other words, whereas the art object has continuous existence as a physical entity, the work of art has an intermittent mode of being. It is actualized in the act of appreciation. Between such acts it "lapses" into nonbeing. It perdures as a possibility inherent in the object, and this is what makes the object itself valuable. The object not only grounds the possibility of existence of the work of art but stabilizes its meaning in such a way that each valid actualization is related to every other valid actualization in recognizable ways.

The biblical text as physical object, that is, the book of the scriptures, is a religious art object. It is the stable physical entity that has continuous existence. But the scripture as meaningful, as sacrament of the word of God, is a work of art. It has an intermittent mode of existence. It must "come into being" as meaning by actualization that occurs through reading, that is, through interpretation. Between readings it "lapses" into nonbeing. The importance of the text as physical entity is precisely that it grounds the possibility of future actualizations of the word of God. Furthermore, the text stabilizes the meaning as an ideal structure so that future valid interpretations are related to earlier ones.

If we combine this insight into the importance of the art object in the life of the work of art with an appreciation of the role of material entities in sacramental actions, especially in the paradigmatic sacramental actions of baptism and eucharist, we can readily understand the place of honor accorded the Bible even when it is not actually being read. Just as the font of baptismal water and the reserved bread of the eucharistic celebration are regarded as sacred even when the sacramental rites are not being actualized, so the book of the scriptures is surrounded with reverence even when it is not being read. Baptismal water and eucharistic bread are only fully sacramental within the context of sacramental action. But the very purpose of preserving the elements even after the completion of the action is to evoke the action and thus to extend its efficacy further into daily life by memory and affection. Baptismal water and eucharistic bread are not "ordinary" bread and water, even outside the immediate liturgical context. Indeed, the sacrament is never completely "absent" as long as they are present. Thus we can, if we understand what we are doing, even refer to these elements themselves as sacraments and meaningfully venerate them. The same is true for the book of the scriptures. To enshrine it, venerate it, bless people with it, flank it with candles, and honor it with incense is entirely appropriate so long as the purpose is to acknowledge the privileged relationship between this object and the full actualization of the word of God in proclamation and hearing.

The problem with sacramental objects is that they always tend to two forms of distortion. The first is the temptation to make the sacramental object a magical object, to invest the object itself with power, in isolation from the context in which the reality comes to actualization. Some people who would never think of meditating on scripture and who seldom or never participate in liturgical celebrations where the word of God is proclaimed staunchly defend the importance of having a family Bible on the living room shelf. The book itself is some kind of protection, a talisman or charm. This is sheer superstition, however harmlessly pious it might be.

The second temptation is more serious, namely, to make an idol of the sacramental object. When a sacramental object becomes an idol it becomes the object of our worship. It is no longer transparent; it no longer functions symbolically by mediating a reality that transcends it. It has become opaque, an obstacle to encounter with the divine, because it has, in fact, replaced the sacred. Idolatry is the replacement of God with something other than God. The most likely candidates for such a replacement are the material realities that mediate God to us. There have certainly been periods in the history of the Church when the eucharistic bread became more idol (at least for the common people) than sacrament, when liturgy was more magic than symbolic action. The same must be said of the book of the scriptures.

In summary, then, the biblical text as meaningful is the sacrament of the word of God, that is, of the mystery of divine revelation. It is sacrament in the fully actualized sense of the word only when it is being read when it is coming to event as meaning through interpretation. However, the book that preserves and localizes for us the possibility of such events of meaning and that stabilizes the meaning and so gives it continuity in the community is a symbolic object that is fittingly venerated so long as it plays its proper role in the context of the entire mystery. The danger of magic and idolatry is not to be underestimated, but neither should it lead to irreverent casualness in our approach to this text that represents the permanent possibility of the event of revelation in our midst.

D. Theological Reflection on Scripture as Word of God:
The Sacred Character of the Bible

All that has been said so far about scripture as word of God has assumed that the Bible is indeed a unique and sacred book. This is the faith of all Christian communities whatever their theoretical leanings in terms of interpretation.
Throughout Christian history the Church has attempted to bring to explicit theological formulation its faith convictions about the sacred character of scripture, and this has resulted in the development of a vocabulary about the Bible that we must now briefly explore. A set of affirmations about scripture as word of God has been compressed into a series of words that have not only expressed these faith convictions but become the rallying points for much of the interdenominational polemic over the Bible.

The terms that require examination are frequently treated as if they belong to a single series denoting various characteristics or qualities of the Bible as sacred scripture. Such is not the case. Two of the terms, revelation and inspiration, are concerned with God’s relation to the content of the Bible. One term, infallibility, concerns the relation of the author to the content. And three of the terms, inerrancy, authority, and normativity, concern the relation of the content to the readers. However, the meaning assigned to any one of the terms affects the meaning of some or all of the others. Consequently, it is difficult to establish a starting point for this examination and very difficult to examine any one of the terms without engaging all of them. In the attempt to clarify the meaning of each of these terms, I will raise two kinds of questions.

First, each of these terms is really a verbal cipher for a (collection of) faith affirmation(s) about scripture. These affirmations have long theological histories involving efforts to say what the affirmations mean and to explain how whatever is being affirmed can be understood in the available categories (usually philosophical) of the day. The ever-actual temptation is to lose the content of the affirmation in the labyrinth of its theological history. Consequently, I will attempt to begin the examination of the meaning of each term with a simple statement of the faith affirmation about scripture that it involves, without regard to the correctness or adequacy of the belief or to the history of its explanation. Next, I will raise the question about whether the affirmation is true and/or meaningful and, if so, in what sense. At that point I will also state explicitly the theoretical position in regard to this affirmation that is implicit in the approach to scripture taken in the rest of this study.

1. Revelation

The predicative of revelation to scripture is a faith affirmation that the contents of the Bible are, or in some sense are related to, divine communication. Strictly speaking, the relation of the text to revelation is the ground and content of the affirmation that the scriptures are the word of God, that is, what God has “to say” to humanity.

The question of revelation, including its possibility and actuality, its extent, its nature, and its mode, is the most foundational question in theology. The answer (whether explicit or implicit) given to this question determines not only the shape and content of a particular theology but the very possibility of elaborating a theology at all. To attempt to trace, even cursorily, the history of theological reflection on revelation or to situate the position operative in this study in relation to major theories of revelation would take us completely beyond the scope of this project. However, it is appropriate at this point to state, in summary fashion, how the statement that the Bible is revelatory is understood and operative in all that follows, at least as it has already been said in this chapter, especially in the section on symbolic revelation as the referent of the expression “word of God.” It should be obvious that not only the possibility but the actuality of divine revelation is being affirmed. Revelation is by no means restricted to the Bible. Indeed, as possibility, divine revelation must be seen as coextensive with human experience. Insofar as the divine desire to give Godself is concerned, all of human experience is meant to be revelatory. For various reasons pertaining to the human limitations and sinfulness that make individuals nonreceptive to the divine self-gift, it is not the case that divine revelation is actually coextensive with human experience. Only in Jesus of Nazareth do we see an entire human existence so fully actualized by the divine self-gift that we can affirm that he is Word of God (i.e., revelation) incarnate. Thus Jesus in his person, work, and paschal mystery is seen to be the paradigmatic instance of divine revelation.

In speaking of revelation as symbolic, I have taken a particular position on the nature and mode of the divine self-gift. Without denying the essential importance of the cognitive dimension of revelation, a symbolic theory places the emphasis on the interpersonal content and mode of revelation. The finality of revelation is not primarily an increase in speculative or practical knowledge but shared life, which necessarily involves knowledge but is not exclusively constituted by it. The symbolic mode of revelation embraces the whole range of perceptible reality but, by its very nature, is preeminently realized in language (taken inclusively rather than restrictively), the most effective way human beings have of rendering their personhood intersubjectively available.

In consequence of the foregoing, the Bible enjoys a privileged position among the multiple actualizations of revelation. As witness, in language, to the most fully appropriated experience of revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition (and most especially in Jesus), it grounds and governs the ongoing revelatory experience of Christians in succeeding ages. Chapter 4 will be concerned with how the New Testament is related to the Christ-event and how it mediates that event for succeeding generations of believers. But for the moment, suffice it to say that the theory of the relation of the New Testament to revelation operative in this study is essentially identical with that affirmed at the end of the gospel according to John: “These [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). By “believing” is meant not primarily intellectual assent to propositions but participation in the signs (that is, in the words and works by which Jesus opened to
his disciples the possibility of sharing his own divine filiation, becoming children of God) culminating in that oneness with Jesus, and through him with God, that he came to offer us.

Anyone who predicates revelation of scripture intends to affirm that the contents of this book bear some special relationship to divine self-communication. The differences among scholars and communities of faith concern how one understands "communication," what one thinks the special relationship is, and how one thinks the Bible functions in mediating that communication to the reader or hearer. Obviously, the answers given to these questions will heavily influence any theory of interpretation. They will also suggest how the predication of revelation to scripture can best be formulated. In terms of the position already taken on the symbolic nature of revelation, it would seem that statements like "Scripture is divine revelation" or "The Bible contains divine revelation" should be avoided as more conducive to misunderstanding than to clarity. It would be more accurate to say that scripture witnesses to revelation provided that this is not understood to mean that the Bible merely provides a record of past revelational experiences (a topic that will be taken up in greater detail in chapter 5). Perhaps the most adequate formulation would be that scripture, by witnessing to foundational revelation, constitutes a privileged possibility of revelation in the present. Scripture is a medium of the divine self-gift for all who approach it in faith.

2. Inspiration

The faith affirmation that the Bible is inspired intends to affirm the divine influence on the writer, the text, the reader, the reading, or some combination of these in virtue of which the text is rightly regarded as sacred scripture or word of God. It is, therefore, very closely related to the notion of revelation and in some presentations or explanations of the two terms they are considered virtually synonymous.

The theological questions concerning inspiration are multiple: the meaning and nature of inspiration, its location (in the author, the text, the reader, and/or reading), its extent (whether all of scripture or only certain parts are inspired and whether there are degrees of inspiration), its effects (whether inspiration makes the Bible revelatory, invests it with divine authority, renders it inerrant), its uniqueness (whether biblical inspiration differs essentially from the inspiration of other religious or artistic classics), and the mode of its occurrence (prophetic ecstasy, dictation, illumination, social or historical processes within the community).

Tracing the long and complicated development of reflection on biblical inspiration is both beyond the scope and outside the interests of this essay. However, certain points in that development can serve as markers by which to map the theological territory within which the hypothesis I will propose can be situated. In the period immediately following Pentecost the early Church affirmed without question the inspiration, that is, the divine source, of "the scriptures," by which it meant the Jewish scriptures that would later be called by Christians the Old Testament (2 Tim. 3:16-17 and 2 Pet. 1:19-21). In other words, the fact of biblical inspiration did not become problematic until Christian writings began to be considered authoritative for the Church.

As the canonization of Christian writings proceeded, the questioning of the fact of biblical inspiration in regard to certain books arose from two directions. On the one hand, some Christians, like the second-century writer Marcion, questioned and even denied the inspiration of the Old Testament. This position was rejected by the Church, which continued to regard the Jewish scriptures as divinely inspired sources for Christian faith. On the other hand, disputes over the canonical status of certain Christian writings, some of which (e.g., the Didache and the Christian apocrypha) were eventually excluded and others of which (e.g., Revelation) were eventually included, raised the question of the relationship between canonicity and inspiration. It is important to note that the Church never considered inspiration the grounds or the criterion for including a writing in the canon but, once a book was canonized, it was regarded as inspired.

Although the inspiration of certain works prior to their inclusion in the canon was questioned at various times, biblical scholars from the beginning until quite recently (i.e., until the Protestant Reformation) never questioned whether those books accepted as canonical were inspired. In other words, the question was whether a given book was biblical, not whether biblical books were inspired. However, since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, during which the Bible came to be studied as a book like other books and the thoroughly human origins, development, and character of various biblical books became evident, many scholars have come to question whether the Bible is inspired in any unique sense of that term and/or whether the question of its inspiration is even significant.

A second point from which to plot the geography of the current discussion is the explanation of the fact of inspiration. From earliest times Christian scholars debated whether the term inspired denoted God’s influence on the writer (the prophetic model of inspiration characteristic of scholars like Augustine) or the character of the text resulting from divine influence upon it (as Origen taught, in his struggle against the Montanist teaching on prophetic inspiration). Although recent theology has tended to concentrate on the quality of the text, the discussion from the patristic through the medieval and Reformation periods concentrated on the writer. In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas enriched the prophetic model of the Fathers by using the Aristotelian philosophical categories of efficient and instrumental causality to explain how God as primary efficient cause could be the true author of scripture without denying the real, though instrumental, secondary causality of the human writer. Reformation authors usually preferred a less philosophically "loaded" version of the prophetic model that presented God as virtually dictating to the biblical authors the content (and, according to some, even the words) of the biblical texts.
In the last few decades, as biblical scholarship has revealed the multiple authorship and long compositional histories of many biblical books, scholars like Karl Rahner (a Catholic) and Paul Achtemeier (a Protestant) have realized how difficult it is to apply the notion of prophetic inspiration to biblical "authors" and have tried to develop historical, communitarian, and interactional theories of inspiration. Currently, the discussion of the process of inspiration, like the discussion of the fact of inspiration, has ceased to claim much attention from theologians except among scholars in the most fundamentalist denominations.

A third point from which to map the terrain of this discussion is the theology of inspiration. No matter how one thinks God and the human author and/or community interacted in the inspiration process, if one accepts the fact of inspiration, one must raise the question of its theological meaning or significance. The spectrum of theological positions extends from an affirmation of the absolute inerrancy of the text resulting from miraculous divine intervention in its production to fideism and/or deistic renunciation of any attempt to understand the meaning of the affirmation of biblical inspiration.

At the former pole we find theories of divine dictation and plenary verbal inspiration. Because these theories almost inevitably lead to fundamentalism in interpretation and to irresolvable conflicts with empirical data, I consider them theologically untenable. At the latter pole we encounter not only simple believers who feel no need to explain their faith in the divine authorship of scripture but also sophisticated scholars who, while freely associating themselves with the faith of the Church that affirms the theological implications of inspiration ("we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to be confided to the sacred Scriptures"), despair of the possibility that anything really illuminating can be said about such an empirically unavailable datum as divine inspiration. In between these two extremes are the positions of writers like Thomas Hoffman, who have attempted to integrate the notion of divine inspiration into theological theories of the Bible as sacred scripture that are both faithful to the Church's traditional belief and compatible with publicly defensible philosophical and scientific positions. The approach I will suggest belongs in this middle range.

Any attempt at a genuine theology of scripture must situate the question of inspiration within some overall theological framework and decide within which area of theology this question belongs. Most of the better theories have placed the question of inspiration within the overall discussion of divine-human cooperation. The starting point for such theories has varied in the course of history, some theologians starting with the divine partner, some with the human, and others with the interaction between them. Any such approach will carry, and be limited by, the intelligibility and conviction of the theory of nature and grace to which it belongs.

In what follows I would like to propose a different kind of approach to inspiration, namely, a linguistic one, in an attempt, on the one hand, to liberate the theological understanding of inspiration from overdependence on the content of particular theologies and, on the other hand, to take more serious account of the legitimate ascendency of secularization (not secularism) in contemporary theological reflection. Rather than starting with a model of divine-human cooperation and asking how this model illuminates the special case of the influence of God on what is, from another standpoint, a human product, I propose starting with an examination of how faith affirmations (for that is what the affirmation of inspiration is) are related to their subject matter and to other kinds of affirmations.

The affirmation that the Bible is inspired belongs to the series of affirmations bearing on such matters as the creation of the universe and the divinity of the human being Jesus of Nazareth. They have in common their concern with revelation occurring in phenomena that are empirically available and can be adequately explained (not as revelatory but as natural entities and/or processes) without attending in any way to their revelatory character.

To affirm that God created the universe is not to affirm that God performed the chronologically first act in the causal series that scientists call evolution. Creation does not belong to the series of finite causes at all. Creation refers to the rootedness of all that is in Being itself, which is not one being among others but the ground, foundation, and source of all beings, the ultimate ontological explanation of why there is something rather than nothing. However, the affirmation of creation, though it includes this ontological insight, goes beyond it to affirm that this universe, so grounded, is disclosive of God, who is identical with Being itself. We are not speaking here of a reasoning process by which the existence and/or attributes of God are affirmed on the basis of what is seen in the universe. We are speaking of the possible but nonnecessary perception (faith) of divine self-disclosure (revelation) that terminates in that shared life discussed above under the heading of symbolic revelation. To affirm creation is to live in a new world, a world one shares with the Creator. The affirmation of creation is not primarily an intellectual assent to a proposition about reality but a personal engagement characterized by humility, gratitude, reverence, and all those other qualities that define the properly religious attitude of the human being before God.

The same structure is verified in regard to the faith affirmation of the incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being, completely understandable as such," indeed, understood as such by most of his contemporaries. "I affirm that he is divine to profess having perceived in him something that could be but does not have to be perceived, namely, the definitive historical instance of the full coincidence between divine self-giving and human experience. In other words, we do not reason from what Jesus did or said to his divinity; rather, through his words and works we experience him as disclosive of the self-giving God and therefore affirm his divinity.
The inspiration of the Bible involves the same kind of experience. The Bible is a book written entirely by human beings. However difficult or even actually impossible it might be to trace the origins of some parts of it or to understand the material it contains, there is no question that there is a human explanation that can account for everything that this book is as an empirically available human artifact. To affirm that this book is divinely inspired is to profess to have experienced it as uniquely disclosive of the divine, which grounds the affirmation that it is influenced by God in some special way.

In all three cases we are dealing with faith statements. These statements do not bear exclusively or primarily upon the empirical phenomena in question, namely, the universe, the human being Jesus of Nazareth, or the book Christians call the Bible. They bear upon the disclosure in and by these entities of something that can be perceived but does not have to be. By recognizing that what is thus perceived does not have to be perceived, we are recognizing that the disclosive power is not in the same "series" with the phenomenal being through which that power operates. In other words, we are designating these realities, properly speaking, as symbolic expressions of the divine. The perceptible realities are ontologically autonomous; they are self-sufficient as grounds of experience and explanation. It is entirely possible, and intellectually defensible, to account for the universe in terms of natural causal factors in the process of evolution, for Jesus by human generation, and for the Bible by human processes of authorship, however different from modern ones they might be.

The affirmation of divine disclosure is, strictly speaking, a faith affirmation. The believer claims to perceive what some others, confronted with the same phenomenon, do not perceive. The most the believer can do is describe and explain the experience. It is useless to try to prove, from the phenomenon itself, that it is disclosive of the divine, and even more futile to try to demonstrate that the phenomenon necessitates such perception the way the pigmentation of an apple necessitates the predication of color or the existence of a disease necessitates the postulation of a noxious cause.

The point of the foregoing is that faith affirmations are of a different order from other types of affirmation, whether the latter are of a scientific or a philosophical nature. Both of the latter must be potentially demonstrable to anyone who can follow the demonstration. Faith affirmations are more akin to poetic discourse. They are verbal testimonies to what has been disclosed but to which one cannot reason and whose truth one cannot demonstrate. This does not mean that faith affirmations are a mere reading into reality of what cannot be seen by others because it is not really there. Faith affirmations arise from our encounter with empirical reality. But, whereas the ordinary mode of perception terminates in the empirical phenomenon or what can be derived from it by human modes of intellection, the faith mode of perception terminates in that which is symbolically presented in the empirical phenomenon. Faith bears upon reality presented in but not coterminous with or reducible to empirical phenomena. In other words, faith is an objectively grounded but nonnecessary response to that which is disclosed in and through phenomena that can be but need not be experienced as disclosive of the divine.

To return now to the question of biblical inspiration, I propose to identify it as the subject of a faith affirmation about the revelatory character of sacred scripture. Inspiration is not strictly identical with revelation, because inspiration refers primarily to the divine influence in virtue of which scripture is revelatory rather than to the revelatory character itself. The two terms are reciprocally illuminating as are creation and cosmic revelation, and incarnation and Jesus as Word of God.

Scripture is disclosive (revelatory) because of the divine influence upon it (inspiration); we recognize it as inspired (divinely influenced) because we experience it as revelatory (disclosive). Inspiration focuses our attention on the divine influence at work in the text and reader while revelation focuses our attention on the disclosive potential of the text as it comes to actualization.

Against the background of this approach to inspiration in terms of the kind of affirmation it involves and the relationship of that affirmation to its subject matter, we can now attend briefly to the subquestions about inspiration noted at the beginning of this section: its extent and location, effects, uniqueness, and mode of occurrence.

Obviously, within this framework of explanation, inspiration would have to be considered coextensive with the biblical phenomenon itself, although it would operate differently at the different moments of that phenomenon. In the composition of the text, one would be dealing with the divine influence operative in the interaction of the tradition, the situation, and the writer(s) by which the divine disclosure comes to expression in revelatory text. At the time of reading/hearing the divine influence is operative in the interaction among the existential situation of hearing/reading, the disclosive potential of the text, and the hearer/reader as focus of that interaction. Inspiration would be most improperly predicated of the text itself considered simply as a book, that is, when it is not functioning sacramentally in any sense of the word.

The primary effect of inspiration, as has already been said, is the revelatory character of sacred scripture. But the approach we have taken rules out the possibility of deducing from the nature of inspiration the specific effects of divine influence on the text itself. The effects of divine inspiration will have to be discovered in and through the community's historical experience with the text as revelatory, just as the meaning of creation and incarnation are discovered in the unfolding of human experience with the universe and with Jesus the Christ. We can certainly expect that the ultimate effects will be salutary, but we have no grounds for an a priori expectation that that salutary influence will take the form of scientific or historical inerrancy or the communication of data strictly unknowable from (not to mention incompatible with) natural sources. I will suggest in
chapters 5 and 6 that inspiration does not necessarily guarantee even the moral truth and/or acceptability of everything scripture presents.

The question of the uniqueness of biblical inspiration is the question of whether biblical inspiration is essentially or at least qualitatively different from the inspiration operative in other (religious and/or artistic) classics, such as Thomas Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* or Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle*. In terms of the understanding of inspiration suggested so far, this question is ill formulated. If inspiration is the divine influence (on production, text, and reading/hearing interaction) that grounds the disclosive potential of scripture, then it is strictly impossible to examine inspiration itself, either scientifically or philosophically. Indeed, if it had been possible to identify inspiration and/or distinguish it from other factors, the early Church would surely have used it as a criterion for the establishment of the canon. If those closest to the origins of the New Testament writings could not discern either the presence or the distinctive character of biblical inspiration, we can safely assume that it is not possible to do so.

It would seem more to the point to start at the other end. The Bible is unique, not because it is inspired or inspired in a way that other works are not, but because of a combination of notes (of which inspiration is one) that makes this book the Church’s primary sacrament of the Word of God. Biblical inspiration is unique because the Bible is special; the Bible is not special because its inspiration is unique.

Acknowledging that many written works are powerfully disclosive of the divine and something much more so than some parts of the Bible involves no denigration of the Bible. The influence of the Spirit of God (which is what we mean by inspiration) is not limited to the Bible any more than the presence of God is limited to the Church. The fear that should some noncanonical book be “discovered” to be inspired would have to be included in the Bible rests on the false premise that the criterion of canonicity is inspiration. Experience has established that many classics of the Christian tradition mediate the encounter with God. They are indeed inspired; they are not, however, biblical. In short, biblical inspiration is unique because of its relation to the Bible, not the other way around.

We turn, finally, to the question that has been the focus of the most involved discussions of inspiration in the last century, namely, the mode of biblical inspiration. How did/does this divine influence occur? There are numerous ways to approach this question? One can inquire how God can (and therefore presumably would) influence a creature (either the producer or the product or the reader in this case); one can inquire how the creature can be influenced without detriment to its integrity and proper autonomy. The approach indicated by what has preceded would be quite different. It would begin with the understanding of symbolic revelation and follow it through its realization in creation, history, incarnation, and sacramental reality in general, with scripture understood as a special instance of the last.

As has been said, divine revelation is potentially coextensive with human experience. The entire created universe in its historical unfolding is potentially disclosive of God, whose self-giving intention is integral to all God’s works. But revelation is an interpersonal reality. It comes to actualization only in human experience, only in the human response of reception and reciprocal self-gift. For various reasons, much of human experience, though potentially revelatory, is actually empty of revelation. The universe is creation, in the fully revelatory sense, only sporadically and imperfectly for most people most of the time. Only in Jesus did the boundless divine desire to give encounter the fully adequate human response, with the result that in his human experience revelation was finally perfectly actualized. He is the Word made flesh, God incarnate, symbolic revelation fully achieved. The scriptures, from a Christian perspective, are the bringing to symbolic disclosure in written discourse of that which is primordially disclosed in Jesus. Scripture is the resymbolization of the paradigmatic symbol. Thus, even the Old Testament fur the Christian takes on its full significance only in relation to Jesus Christ.

The mode of inspiration, then, refers to the way symbolic revelation occurs in and through human interaction with a text under the influence of the Spirit of God. It is best understood in terms of the fully human processes that brought the text into existence and by which it is actualized as revelation down through the ages. The processes of originiation of the text included the experience of revelation in specific historical circumstances in the faith community that lived the tradition about which and out of which the authors wrote. The talents of individuals and their personal, historical, ideological, and literary limitations were integral to the process. In some cases the process involved research and multiple redactions of sources. In every case it involved the use of a specific human language operating through deliberately selected literary genres. As the text is read by successive generations, the whole complex of processes involved in interpretation and appropriation comes into play. The work of translation, philological analysis, textual criticism, historical and archaeological research, literary criticism, and a host of other forms of exegetical and critical endeavor belong to this work of interpretation, as do liturgical contextualizing, preaching and teaching, and personal meditation.

In short, the approach of mode of inspiration shifts our focus from that which is perceived in and through the biblical text to the actual human experience with the text that mediates revelation under the influence of the Spirit of God. To ask how inspiration takes place is not to ask for a description of the divine operations but for a phenomenology of the human experience of divine revelation mediated by the revelatory text of scripture.

3. Infallibility and Inerrancy

The notions of infallibility and inerrancy are often used interchangeably, even though infallibility (the incapability of erring in judgment or failing to bring true and correct judgments to adequate expression) is more properly applied to the
author and inerrancy (the freedom from error that infallibility guarantees) is more properly predicated of the text.

Infallibility and inerrancy as essential notes of scripture are integral to a fundamentalist position that understands scripture to have originated miraculously (e.g., by divine dictation or verbal inspiration) and therefore to contain propositional revelation that makes an absolutely authoritative claim upon and constitutes the unique and absolute norm of faith. The importance of inerrancy of the text in such a theology of scripture derives from the latter’s conception of revelation as propositional. If propositions are to be authoritative, they must be true, and if they are to be absolutely authoritative, they must be absolutely true. If some propositions in scripture are false or mistaken, then, in principle, any or all could be, and the ground of faith would be destroyed. Hence the importance of maintaining the infallibility of the authors. They did not err because they could not err; therefore, all of the propositions in the Bible are true (inerrant), authoritative, and normative.

Obviously, such a conception of scripture in general, and of its infallibility and inerrancy in particular, is incompatible with the understanding of scripture proposed in this chapter. The primary objection to the fundamentalist notion of inerrancy is not that it is an indefensible claim in view of the evident factual and even theological and moral errors in the Bible. Although this is true, the primary objection is not empirical but theological, namely, that attributing inerrancy to the Bible constitutes a kind of biblical Docetism. It is analogous to such christological assertions as that Jesus had all possible knowledge, even that not yet discovered in his day, or that he only appeared to die but could not really do so because he did not really have a material or physical, therefore mortal, nature. Inerrancy in the Bible, like immortality or omniscience in Jesus, would constitute a denaturing of the symbolic medium of revelation into a thin disguise for an overpowering divine presence that alone is real. Just as an omniscient or immortal Jesus only appears to be a genuine human being (since human beings are, by nature, limited in knowledge and mortal), an inerrant Bible would only appear to be a genuine human text. A theology of symbolic revelation, by contrast, affirms the reality of the symbolic medium and takes completely seriously the consequences of its reality for the occurrence and nature of revelation.

A second theological problem raised by the affirmation that the Bible is inerrant is the conception of faith and of God that it involves. Essentially, an inerrant text makes not only an absolute claim on faith but a necessary one. Symbolic revelation, as has been said, grounds a possible but nonnecessary response because it is, of its very nature, ambiguous. The symbol simultaneously reveals and conceals. Consequently, faith remains a free, that is, a nonnecessarily, response. An inerrant scripture admits of only one response, namely, unqualified intellectual assent accompanied by absolute moral submission. In other words, the notion of inerrancy in scripture is the end of a fine thread that, if followed, leads to a conception of God as an absolute, authoritarian monarch whose will is clear and who brooks no dispute. Symbolic revelation is characteristic of a God who offers and invites but does not compel response.

Acceptance of an approach to scripture as symbolic revelation necessitates joining those scholars who have, increasingly in recent years, called for the discreet but definitive burial of the notion of biblical inerrancy on the grounds that it solves a few spurious problems by creating numerous real ones.

4. Authority and Normativity

Having rejected the proposition that biblical authority (that is, the divine claim of scripture upon believers individually and as a community of faith) is derived from inerrancy and/or infallibility, we must reexamine the question of whether and in what sense scripture can be considered authoritative.

Authority is a very slippery concept because it is applied in so many different ways to very different entities. We speak of authoritative people, statements, and positions; of the authority of law, public opinion, or evidence. But however the term is used, it always refers to a claim addressed to someone who, in some sense of the word, "must" respond. As a claim it differs from violence in that the person so addressed is not, strictly speaking, forced to respond. But as a claim it imposes, in some sense, some kind of an obligation to respond. This general notion will suffice as a basis for consideration of biblical authority.

The exercise of authority and/or the character of authoritative ness seem to fall into two broad classes. First, there is what might be called unilateral and absolute authority and, second, what might be called dialogical and relative authority. In the first class would be all exercises of authority that are finally coercive, covering a range from the quasi-violence of the command given by a lethally armed assailant to the self-evidence of a mathematical axiom. In such cases, to hear the address is to recognize the absolute necessity, for the sake of physical or intellectual self-preservation, of responding with compliance or assent or both.

In the second class, there are at least two instances worth exploring because both are illuminating in regard to the Bible. Dialogical authority characterizes situations in which the address is not coercive. What is said (in the broad, not strictly verbal, sense of this word) invites investigation of its claims, that is, verification of its truth claims and/or evaluation of its moral or behavioral claims.

First, there are the addresses to our mind by data that we constitute as evidential authority. When confronted by data the validity of whose claims is not self-evident we engage in all the forms of investigation necessary to decide whether those claims warrant assent or not. If and when we establish to our satisfaction that they do, we acknowledge the authority of the data, that is, we confer authority upon the data. For example, if we are trying to establish a critical text and come upon a document that is signed by the author, we do not immediately assume that it is an authentic autograph. But if,
after the fullest and most minute evaluation possible, we establish beyond a reasonable doubt that the document is indeed an autograph, the document assumes an authority in regard to the textual tradition that is determinative for our critical work. In this case the datum approaches the kind of authority characteristic of self-evident truths. But it never quite attains such status, because it is always possible, no matter how remote the possibility, that new evidence will again cast doubt on the validity of the datum’s truth claims.

It is the nature of all historical evidence, including that contained in the Bible, to be of this sort. In chapter 4 we will have more to say about the historical character of biblical material and its influence on interpretation, but here it is important to recognize that no matter how well established certain historical conclusions may be, they are never metaphysically or mathematically certain, because such certitude is not possible concerning contingent events. In relation to historical material, we are always involved in the process of conferring authority on data and recognizing the proportional and relative claims of such data.56

The second instance of dialogical authority that is important in relation to the Bible is what we might call disclosive authority. In this case, the address of authority never fully transcends its character as appeal. It never attains even relatively evidential status such that, if one wishes to reject the appeal, one must "disprove" its claims. In this category are such appeals as the claim of the beautiful to aesthetic response, the claim of a suffering human being to compassion, the claim of a parent to filial piety, the claim of the loving rebuke of a true friend to a hearing and even to a response of repentance and conversion, the claim of friendship to fidelity, the claim of one who has demonstrated his or her love to be believed. Such claims have in common that they call for a response that is not exclusively or even primarily intellectual but affective and moral.

These claims are certainly authoritative, but it is obvious that they are in no sense absolute or coercive. It is always possible to resist such a claim, and even if someone could force a response to it, the response would be vitiated by the very fact of being forced. But what is also characteristic of these claims is that though, on the one hand, they are never absolute or coercive, on the other hand, they are more compelling than those that are absolute. The reason is that the result of refusing to respond is not some kind of sanction such as physical violence, ignorance, or the diversion of one's research; it is the diminution of the self.

The difference between these two types of authority, namely, unilateral absolute authority and dialogical relative authority, might be characterized as the difference between the claim made by imposition and the claim made by "soft" evidence and/or by disclosure. In the first case the will of another or the evidence of the data imposes itself on the addressee. One must either respond appropriately or suffer the sanctions. In the second case something or someone is opened to us, and an invitation is issued to engage the reality so disclosed. To respond is to commit oneself, to be changed, to be initiated into a reality that one does not eventu-

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...
on that reflection." But it only functions this way when the integral reality of
God upon which theological reflection works, and that it acts as a negative check
on that reflection. But it only functions this way when the integral reality of
scripture, including not only the text itself but also the tradition out of which the
text comes and which it produces, is taken into account. This is extremely difficult
to do, because God's self-revelation is characterized by such variety and diversity
and even seeming self-contradiction that only a wide theological pluralism seems
to afford some access to the knowledge of God that the Church seeks. We will
return to this topic in chapter 6.

The scriptures are also normative for the Church's mission of announcing
and fostering the reign of God in this world. The contemporary faith community,
in trying to derive guidance from the Bible, especially from the gospels, on such
complex and peculiarly modern questions as nuclear war, is making it very clear
that the aphoristic approach to the Bible (not to mention more primitive prooftext-
ing) is worse than useless. For example, for every text that seems to justify war,
another can be adduced that seems to require the renunciation of war; a church
that wants to take literally and absolutely the prohibition of divorce in Matthew
19:6 is hard put to justify not taking literally the clear injunction that bishops be
married in 1 Timothy 3:2 when it is considering the question of mandatory
celibacy for the clergy. The same problems attend the search for definitive biblical
answers to innumerable other concrete modern questions.

The normativity of scripture in relation to the Church's overall mission is con-
stituted by its presentation of the reign of God that Jesus preached. As biblical
scholars and theologians have made us aware, the reign of God is not a static real-
ity described in the Bible that we can understand comprehensively and then create
in the world but a tensive metaphor that initiates us into a dynamic of divine-
human relationship whose real consequences in individual and social life are
never predetermined. The only way we can learn what the reign of God means
for our own times is by undertaking to live authentically in that dispensation and,
from within that experience, reflecting on what that life invites us to realize in our
world.

Scripture is also normative for the faith life, including morality, of the indi-
vidual Christian. But again, it is futile to try to derive from scripture dogmatic
formulas or a list of specific ordinances to guide our responses in the concrete
experiences of daily life. The monumental efforts of some people to establish
"what the Bible says" about everything from the time of the final judgment to the
legitimacy of Marian devotion or to "prove" from the Bible that specific human
acts that are not already known from nonbiblical sources to be evil (such as mur-
der) are always seriously sinful have regularly failed. The commands of Jesus
are not specific moral injunctions but the coordinates of a way of life whose par-
ticular realizations will vary enormously from person to person, culture to cul-
ture, and age to age. The Gospel command to love one another does not tell us
specifically what to do in relation to military service, a failed marriage, the han-
dung of criminals, or even our own sexuality. It invites us to a kind of life, to dis-
cipleship, that we must live with others who share this vocation, and in the pro-
cess of so living we must discover what it means to follow Jesus. Some of our
discoveries are indeed irreversible, such as the realization that slavery is so con-
trary to the meaning of Christian discipleship that it must be forever renounced
(despite the acceptance of it in the New Testament [I Tim. 6:1-21]). But others,
such as those in the area of medical ethics, remain tentative. Some conclusions,
in the course of time, will be seen as erroneous or no longer valid, such as the
medieval prohibition of usury.

In short, the normativity of scripture must be understood in function of one's
overall theology of scripture. If scripture is understood as a repository of divinely
revealed true propositions and moral absolutes, then normativity will appear as
an application of those propositions and absolutes, literally understood, to matters
theological, missionary, and personal. If scripture is understood as the sacrament
of divine revelation, of God's historical self-disclosure, then normativity will be
understood as the ever-developing guiding influence on our thought and action of
an ever-deepening familiarity with God in Jesus. For those seeking absolute
norms for knowledge and behavior, the latter position will appear incoherent,
unstable, and finally inadequate. For those who realize that the only God worth
knowing is a personal God, and that all personal relationships are dialogical and
relative, the "uncontrollability" of God's self-revelation is a source of joyful
astonishment and an invitation to the unwavering confidence that only a God of
endlessly original love can justify.

E. The Role of Faith in Biblical Interpretation

On the basis of these reflections on scripture as word of God, it is possible to
draw some preliminary conclusions about the role of faith in the interpretation of
scripture, particularly of the New Testament. It should be evident that the answer
one gives to the question of whether faith is necessary for, irrelevant to, or an
impediment to valid interpretation depends directly on one's theology of scripture.
It also depends on how one defines faith.

In the New Testament faith is not presented as a univocal notion. Jesus praised
the faith of people who not only did not know who he was but who were not even
Jews, that is, who did not share the monotheistic belief of Israel in the God
revealed to the chosen people. In one case he said of a pagan, "Truly I tell you,
in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt. 8:10). In another, he granted
the petition of a Syro-Phoenician woman, saying to her, "A woman, great is your
faith!" (Matt. 15:28). Faith, then, is not exclusively adherence to a revealed law.
What it seems to mean in such cases is a fundamental openness of the person to
transcendence. What people whose faith -saved them seemed to have in common
was their resistance to the primordial human temptation to make oneself the mea-
sure of the possible. These people were willing to accept the possibility that
something could exist, could act, that went beyond their own knowledge and powers. They were willing to appeal for help and to accept it from a source they did not understand or control.

Faith, in the New Testament, has another meaning that is more specific. It denotes the actualization of that openness to the transcendent by a specific acceptance of and adherence to Jesus and his teaching. This is full Christian faith, belief that Jesus is the one sent by God and that he has the words of eternal life. The fourth gospel offers perhaps the fullest treatment of this kind of faith (see, e.g., John 6:68-69; 11:25-27).

If scripture is regarded as the sacrament of divine revelation, it follows that the symbolic medium through which this revelation takes place is a fully human “free-standing” reality. Just as one who did a laboratory analysis of the eucharistic bread would find real—and only—bread, so the Bible is really a human text that can be analyzed and understood as such without reference to the transcendent reality that it mediates. It is the nature of symbolic revelation that the symbolic medium is not denatured or turned into some insubstantial veil of appearances. It retains its full reality and as such can be analyzed and understood. This is precisely why symbolic revelation, although it makes a believing response objectively possible, never necessitates such a response. Consequently, the Bible can be studied and understood as a human text without believing in the God whom Christians claim this text meditates. However, one cannot abstract from the truth claims of the text as text. And in the case of the New Testament these claims bear upon the person and message of Jesus.

If faith is understood as fundamental, nonthematized openness to the transcendent, then faith is necessary for any adequate interpretation of the Bible, because this text’s truth claims bear upon religious reality, that is, the transcendent. One who approaches this text with an a priori and nonnegotiable conviction that no such claims can be taken seriously because they are without exception false cannot validly interpret this text, not because one must share Christian faith to do so, but because all interpretation of human texts, and especially of classics, demands that their truth claims be loyally engaged even if such engagement leads eventually to the establishment of their falsity. 27 What is being said here about the non-Christian interpreter of the Bible would hold just as well for a Christian undertaking to interpret the Koran or the Bhagavad Gita or any other religious classic.

If faith is understood as personal adherence to Jesus as the Christ and acceptance of his teaching as the word of life, faith would not be necessary for a valid interpretation of the text as text but only for an interpretation of the text as symbolic revelation, that is, as sacred scripture. The evident reason for this is that one cannot experience the Bible as scripture unless one can perceive in the text the very particular self-disclosure of God that is the content and form of Christian faith. That perception might be initially evoked even in the non-Christian and/or nonreligious "secular" reader. But only one whose spiritual sensibility has been formed and educated by life in the Christian community, whose intelligence has been enlightened by the faith of that community, whose affectivity is enlivened by the experience of God’s love in Christ can hear integrally what the text as scripture is saying.

In summary, against the background of a theology of scripture as symbolic revelation, that is, as sacrament of the Word of God, the answer to the question about the relationship of faith to interpretation is twofold. Faith as a fundamental openness to the religious truth claims of the text is a requirement for even minimally valid interpretation of the text as text; faith as thematic Christian commitment is necessary for interpretation of the Bible as scripture. Obviously, if one holds that this text is scripture, then an adequate interpretation, one that takes full account of the text in terms of its own nature and purpose, requires its interpretation as scripture.

In other words, a true and adequate hermeneutical theory must finally embrace the whole reality of the object to be interpreted. From one point of view, the biblical text is a human text, and one can develop a hermeneutical theory that will ground its interpretation as a human text. Such a theory would be substantially identical with the hermeneutical theory developed for the interpretation of any classical religious text. From another point of view, the one adopted in this study, this text is sacred scripture, and an adequate hermeneutical theory is one that takes full account of the Bible’s reality as a human text that is a privileged mediation of the divine-human encounter. This amounts to a claim that biblical hermeneutics as such (that is, as a theory of interpretation of the Bible as scripture) encompasses the general canons of interpretation but is not simply identical with them, because the object of interpretation governs the theory of interpretation, and in the case of the Bible there is more here than a text. One is engaged with the revelatory text.

Notes


2. The most comprehensive recent study of metaphor, making use of virtually all the recent work in this field, is Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). A brief summary exposition can be found in IT, pp. 45-69.

For a compact but lucid presentation of contemporary theory on metaphor, see Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 32-42. McFague supplies extensive bibliography on metaphor, including virtually all the major works on the subject influencing biblical scholars today.

Among contemporary biblical scholars who have emphasized the relevance of new understandings of metaphor for New Testament interpretation are George Craig, John Dominic Crossan, John Donahue, Robert Funk, Norman Perrin, Phyllis Trible, and Amos Wilder. I am indebted to these authors, esp. to McFague and Ricoeur, for the material on metaphor in this chapter.


See TM, pp. 153-155, on the distinction between sign and symbol.


15. Treatises on revelation are historically a fairly recent phenomenon, dating back only to the Enlightenment. However, some implicit understanding of revelation necessarily underlies every theological point.

An excellent entry into this subject is provided by Avery Dulles in Models of Revelation (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983).

17. For a succinct overview of the history of this question, see Raymond F. Collins, "Inspiration: NJBC 63:58-53.


21. For a brief historical overview of both Catholic and Protestant developments, see Robert Guss, Authority of the Scriptures: Quest for a Norm," Bibl 13 (April 1983): 39-66. This article contains an excellent selective bibliography on the topic. See also Guss’s The Authority of the Bible: Theories of Inspiration, Revelation and the Canon of Scripture (New York: Paulist, 1985) and its extensive bibliography.
