found themselves liberated from Hitler only to discover that they had been rescued by Stalin.

Rival approaches to authority

For some writers, the notion of 'the authority of Scripture' is unacceptable on account of a prior commitment to the authority of something else. In part, the evangelical commitment to the authority of Scripture represents a careful and critical assessment of rival approaches to authority, and an affirmation that Scripture must be regarded as carrying greater theological and spiritual weight than them. In what follows, we shall explore four rival approaches, and subject them to critical evaluation. Each of these concepts is complex, and worthy of extended discussion in their own right; sadly, such a book-length analysis lies beyond the scope of the present study, with the result that the four areas to be discussed cannot be engaged with to the extent that those with a particular concern for methodology would regard as satisfactory. The four areas in question are:

1. Culture
2. Experience
3. Reason
4. Tradition

The first two are characteristic of 'liberal' approaches to theology, which, distressed by the particularity of the Christian faith, attempt to found theology on allegedly 'universal' foundations. We begin by considering what authority can be accorded to culture.

1. Culture

Some liberal writers have argued that theology is to seek its public legitimation and justification by engaging with western culture. An excellent example of this approach can be found in the works of Gordon Kaufman, who argues as follows:

> The roots of theology are not restricted to the life of the church or to special dogmas or documents venerated in the church, nor are they to be found in something as inchoate as 'raw experience'. They are to be found, rather, in the ordinary language(s) of Western culture at large.[37]

Yet this statement raises fundamental questions of such magnitude that this approach to theology founders before it leaves the harbour. Why *western* culture? What can conceivably justify this ethnocentricity? Something alarmingly like a crude cultural imperialism nestles within this affirmation, which writes off the remainder of global culture as theologically insignificant. Just as nineteenth-century British liberals believed that the best way to improve the world was to bring it all under British rule,[38] so theological liberalism seems to assume that only a western liberal outlook has any global viability. Asian and African Christianity will just have to learn from their western superiors. This approach cannot be taken seriously in today's world, in which the failings and limitations of western culture are evident, even to those who live within its bounds.

Furthermore, the naïve appeal to 'western culture' in the singular cannot be sustained in a modern pluralist culture. The liberal approach is unquestionably at its most credible within a context in which there is a single outlook characteristic of society as a whole – such as that which appears to be presumed by the disarmingly simplistic phrase 'western culture'. Sociologist Peter L. Berger notes that 'every human society has its own corpus of officially credited wisdom, the beliefs and values that most people take as self-evidently true'. There was a point when western society was both culturally homogeneous and professedly Christian. In such a context, liberalism had considerable appeal. But this neat and tidy approach has become virtually unworkable through the chronic intellectual and moral pluralism of modern western society. In the past – for example, in sixteenth-century England – there may have been only one set of beliefs and values in a culture; now, there are many competing beliefs and values on offer, encouraged by a polity which has come to regard the tolerance and fostering of plurality as a national goal in itself, consonant with the pursuit of individual liberty.[39]

An excellent example of a significant work to illustrate this western cultural imperialism while claiming to establish universal norms may be found in Lawrence Kohlberg's analysis of the development of moral stages from infancy to adulthood.[40] Kohlberg believed that he had uncovered a universal cultural pattern; his many critics made the point that his 'moral stages' related only to white males in western post-Enlightenment culture.[41] The same fundamental fallacy underlies the liberal attempt to globalize or totalize on the basis of western culture; allegedly 'universal' judgments or truths are adduced on the basis of highly ethnocentric and particular values and beliefs. Western liberalism has thus been forced to concede its own cultural particularity, and abandon its pretensions to universality. The theological implications of this development for any kind of appeal to 'culture' as a foundational theological resource will be painfully obvious.

A theological liberalism of this kind thus finds itself increasingly adrift, having lost what was once its confident and secure ideological moorings. What is the sense in making a universal appeal to 'culture' when there is no universal culture to appeal to? Berger comments thus on the enormous difficulties facing the liberal theological enterprise in a modern western pluralist culture:

> The various efforts by Christians to accommodate to the 'wisdom of the world' in this situation becomes a difficult, frantic and more than a little ridiculous affair. Each time that one has, after an enormous effort, managed to adjust the faith to the prevailing culture, that culture turns around and changes . . . Our pluralistic culture forces those who would 'update' Christianity into a state of permanent nervousness. The 'wisdom of the world', which is the standard by which they would modify the religious tradition, varies from one social location to another; what is worse, even in the same locale it keeps on changing, often rapidly.[42]

Berger's sociological analysis makes it clear that some views will be 'the accepted wisdom in one social milieu and utter foolishness in another'. Or, to put it another way, it is not a universal way of

thinking or set of values; it is socially located, in a specific class or social group. Earlier, we noted how 'fundamentalism' is often linked with a sociological address that would look something like 'lower middle class from the deep South'. Liberalism has traditionally occupied a rather different sociological address: that of the cultural élite. Berger's perceptive comments here merit close study:

> *The wisdom of the world today always has a sociological address.* In consequence, every accommodation to it on the part of Christians will be 'relevant' in one very specific social setting (usually determined by class), and 'irrelevant' in another. Christians, then, who set out to accommodate the faith to the modern world should ask themselves which sector of that world they seek to address. Very probably, whatever *aggiornamento* they come up with will include some, exclude others. And if the *aggiornamento* is undertaken with the cultural élite in mind, then it is important to appreciate that the beliefs of this particular group are the most fickle of all.[43]

It is thus potentially meaningless to talk about 'making Christianity relevant to the modern world' or to 'western culture'. This implies a theoretical universality to 'the modern world' and 'western culture' which is absent in reality. Every attempt to accommodate Christianity to the beliefs of one social grouping proves to make it irrelevant to another. The paradox underlying the entire liberal enterprise is that for everyone for whom the gospel is made 'relevant', there is someone else for whom it is made irrelevant.

A more fundamental problem, however, relates to the traditional liberal insistence that Christian theology relate to 'modern ways of thinking' or 'values acceptable to our culture'. In a monolithic culture, this strategy is fairly straightforward, whatever its theological deficiences may be. However, in an society which is openly committed to pluralism, these demands degenerate into empty platitudes. *Which* ways of thinking? *Which* values? Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, reacting against naïve rhetoric about 'rationality' and 'justice', provocatively entitled his celebrated

book, severely undermining liberalism's intellectual foundations, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Furthermore, the rapid pace of cultural change in the West results in cultural accommodation having an inbuilt outdatedness; today's prevailing wisdom rapidly becomes tomorrow's discarded whim.

To the historian of Christian theology in the last fifty or so years, the same pattern may be seen to emerge consistently: the 'spirit of the age' turns out to be remarkably ephemeral, leading to a correspondingly brief window of credibility for theologies which ground themselves in contemporary social mores. It was this observation which prompted the wise comment of William Inge, a former Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London: 'If you marry the spirit of your own generation, you will be a widow in the next.'[44] Thus the seemingly assured radical positions of the 1960s came to be overturned during the 1980s, just as the rise of postmodernism reflects the seriously eroded credibility of a universal rationality once regarded as central to 'liberal' theological method. The noted Jewish liberal writer Eugene B. Borowitz is a perceptive critic of this fatally vulnerable trend in liberal theology. Surveying the ruins of liberal religious thought, both Jewish and Christian, Borowitz points out the vulnerability – indeed, the *indefensibility* – of its central beliefs:

> Liberalism lost its cultural hegemony largely because of the demythologization of its allies, universal rationalism and science. At one time we thought them not only our finest sources of truth but our surest means to human ennoblement. Today the sophisticated know that they deal only in possible 'constructions of reality', and the masses sense that they commend ethical relativism more than necessary values and duties.[45]

But perhaps the most fundamental criticism of all here concerns the 'givenness of culture'. As we have seen, German culture became dominated by National Socialism during the 1930s. Those who argued that theology should take its cues or seek its foundations in culture soon found themselves arguing that Christian theology

should respond to the totally new situation created by the rise of National Socialism by taking on board Nazi ideas and values (see pp. 60–61). Thus Emanuel Hirsch argued that, since 'National Socialism, based on the right of historical change, is becoming the self-evident and normative form of live for all Germans', Christianity in Germany was under obligation to incorporate these norms into its life and doctrine.[46] Much the same point has been made in subsequent situations, with demands that Christianity conform to the latest cultural trend, on the assumption that whatever direction culture takes is somehow the outcome of divine providence, and of binding importance. As the rise of Nazism and Stalinism have made abundantly clear, cultural trends need to be criticized. They cannot be allowed to be normative. And that demands that Christianity ground itself on something which transcends cultural particularities – namely, the self-revelation of God.

2. Experience

'Experience' is an imprecise term. The origins of the English word are relatively well understood: it derives from the Latin term *experientia*, which could be interpreted as 'that which arises out of travelling through life (*ex-perientia*)'. In this broad sense, it means 'an accumulated body of knowledge, arising through first-hand encounter with life'. When one speaks of 'an experienced teacher' or 'an experienced doctor', the implication is that the teacher or doctor has learned her craft through first-hand application. Yet the term has developed an acquired meaning, which particularly concerns us here. It has come to refer to the inner life of individuals, in which those individuals become aware of their own subjective feelings and emotions.[47] It relates to the inward and subjective world of experience, as opposed to the outward world of everyday life. A series of writings, including William James's celebrated study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), have stressed the importance of the subjective aspects of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Christianity is not simply about ideas; it is also about the interpretation and transformation of the inner life of the individual. This concern with human

experience is particularly associated with existentialism, which has sought to restore an awareness of the importance of the inner life of individuals to both theology and philosophy.[48]

Two main approaches may be discerned within Christian theology to the question of the relation of experience to theology:

1. The approach which has become especially associated with liberal writers, which argues that experience provides a foundational resource for Christian theology.

2. The traditional approach, associated with evangelicalism, which argues that Christian theology provides an interpretative framework by which human experience may be interpreted.

We shall begin our analysis of these options by considering the first position, which regards human experience as *explicans*, something which possesses explanatory or revelatory significance.

The idea that human religious experience can act as a foundational resource for Christian theology has obvious attractions. It suggests that Christian theology is concerned with human experience – something which is common to all humanity, rather than the exclusive preserve of a small group. To those who are embarrassed by the 'scandal of particularity' the approach has many merits. It suggests that all the world religions are basically human responses to the same religious experience – often referred to as 'a core experience of the transcendent'. Theology is thus the Christian attempt to reflect upon this common human experience, in the knowledge that the same experience underlies the other world religions. We shall return to this point later in dealing with the question of the relation of Christianity to the other religions.

This approach also has considerable attractions for Christian apologetics, as the writings of many recent American theologians, especially Paul Tillich and David Tracy, make clear. In that humans share a common experience, whether they chose to regard it as 'religious' or not, Christian theology can address this common experience. The problem of agreeing upon a common starting-point is thus avoided; the starting-point is already provided, in human experience. Apologetics can demonstrate that the Christian gospel makes sense of common human experience. This approach is probably seen at its best in Paul Tillich's sermons *The Courage to*

Be, which attracted considerable attention after their publication in 1952. It seemed to many that Tillich had succeeded in correlating the Christian proclamation with common human experience.[49]

But there are difficulties here. The most obvious is that there is actually very little empirical evidence for a 'common core experience' throughout human history and culture. The idea is easily postulated, and virtually impossible to verify. This approach has found its most mature and sophisticated expression in the 'Experiential-Expressive Theory of Doctrine', to use a term employed by the distinguished Yale theologian George Lindbeck. In his volume *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), Lindbeck provides an important analysis of the nature of Christian doctrine.[50] One of the many merits of this book is the debate which it has initiated over this unjustly neglected aspect of Christian theology, which has assumed new importance recently on account of the impact of the ecumenical movement.

Lindbeck suggests that theories of doctrine may be divided into three general types. The cognitive-propositionalist theory lays stress upon the cognitive aspects of religion, emphasizing the manner in which doctrines function as truth claims or informative propositions. The experiential-expressive theory interprets doctrines as non-cognitive symbols of inner human feelings or attitudes. A third possibilty, which Lindbeck himself favours, is the cultural-linguistic approach to religion. Lindbeck associates this model with a 'rule' or 'regulative' theory of doctrine. It is Lindbeck's criticism of the second such theory which is of particular interest to us at this point.

The 'experiential-expressive' theory, according to Lindbeck, sees religions, including Christianity, as public, culturally conditioned manifestations and affirmations of pre-linguistic forms of consciousness, attitudes and feelings. In other words, there is some common universal 'religious experience', which Christian theology (in common with other religions) attempts to express in words. Experience comes first; theology comes in later. As Lindbeck argues, the attraction of this approach to doctrine is grounded in a number of features of late twentieth-century western thought. Thus a contemporary preoccupation with inter-religious dialogue lends

plausibility to the view that the various religions are diverse expressions of a common core experience, such as an 'isolable core of encounter' or an 'unmediated awareness of the transcendent'.

The principal objection to this theory, thus stated, is its obvious gross phenomenological inaccuracy. As Lindbeck points out, the possibility of religious experience is shaped by religious expectation, so that 'religious experience' is conceptually derivative, if not vacuous. 'It is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous.'[51] The assertion that 'the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate'[52] is ultimately an axiom, an unverifiable hypothesis – perhaps even a dogma, in the pejorative sense of the term – not least on account of the difficulty of locating and describing the 'core experience' concerned. As Lindbeck rightly points out, this would appear to suggest that there is 'at least the logical possibility that a Buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently'.[53] The theory can only be credible if it is possible to isolate a common core experience from religious language and behaviour, and demonstrate that the latter two are articulations of or responses to the former.

Attempts to evaluate this theory are totally frustrated by its inherent resistance to verification or falsification. While conclusive empirical evidence is not available to allow us to evaluate the suggestion that religious language and rites are a response to prior religious experience, the possibility that religious language and rites *create* that experience (for example, through arousing expectation of such experience, and indicating in what manner it may arise, and what form it might assume) is at least as probable on both the empirical and logical levels.[54]

Equally, the suggestion that the experience of individuals is to be placed above, or before, the communal religion itself seems to invert observable priorities. Thus Schleiermacher, who might be taken as the archetype of such an experientially grounded approach to theology, does not understand 'experience' to designate the undifferentiated and idiosyncratic emotions or existential

apprehensions of each individual believer; rather, he understands 'experience' to be grounded in the memory, witness and celebration of the community of faith.[55] The theological significance of the Christian experience is articulated at the communal, not the individual, level.

The notion of a common core experience which remains constant throughout the diversity of human cultures and the flux of history, while being articulated and expressed in an astonishing variety of manners, remains profoundly unconvincing. Empirically, this notion is highly questionable: thus Lonergan wisely concedes that religious experience varies from one culture, class and individual to another,[56] while apparently being reluctant to draw the conclusion his concessions suggest, however tentatively – that it varies from one *religion* to another. While the doctrinal tradition of the church is publicly available for analysis, however, allowing its allegedly 'unchangeable' character to be assessed critically, religious experience remains a subjective, vacuous and nebulous concept, the diachronic continuity and constancy of which necessarily lie beyond verification or – as seems the more probable outcome – falsification.[57]

The main lines of Lindbeck's critique of experiential theories of doctrine which treat doctrine as dealing with ubiquitous prereflective private experience common to all religions are timely and persuasive. Three further criticisms of such theories may be added, as follows.

In the first place, we must note the emphatic insistence within at least one strand of the Christian tradition that experience and reality are, at least potentially, to be radically opposed. Doctrine does not necessarily express or articulate experience, but may contradict it. Perhaps the most celebrated instance of such an attitude may be found in Martin Luther's 'theology of the cross',[58] in which emphasis is laid simultaneously upon the importance of religious experience in the authentic Christian life, and its unreliability as a theological resource. The 'experience seeking expression' in the writings of a 'theologian of glory' and a 'theologian of the cross' (to use Luther's expressions) gives every appearance of being very different – yet both require to be

subsumed under the same 'experiential-expressivist' model.

In the second place, there is an apparent assumption that the *present* experience of an individual, whatever that may be, constitutes the primary datum of religion. This emphasis appears to suggest that no fundamental distinction may be made between the experience of an individual who has deliberately and consciously determined to reject a religion, and one who has equally deliberately and consciously determined to embrace one. Consider, for example, an occurrence which is increasingly common within the global religious situation, but with important roots in the formative stages of the Christian tradition – conversion.[59] Take the case of an individual, brought up within a purely secular environment and disposed towards a materialist atheism, who subsequently discovers Christianity and becomes a 'born-again Christian'. Is the experience of this individual in these two very different situations the same? It is, surely, inconceivable that they should be identical, or even similar, particularly if one of the more experientially orientated Christian traditions is implicated in the conversion experience. Further, empirical psychological studies have indicated that 'committed' religious individuals have markedly different psychological qualities and social attitudes from those who assume a merely 'consensual' position.[60] In other words, those who have actively chosen to commit themselves to faith are quite distinct in their outlooks from those who simply acquiesce in social attitudes and trends, of which religion is one. Such differences are expressed at both the experiential and cognitive level – for example, the manner in which prayer is experienced and interpreted.[61] Yet the experiential-expressivist approach to religion appears to lack the conceptual framework to distinguish these situations, on account of what Lindbeck terms the 'homogenizing tendencies associated with liberal experiential-expressivism'.[62] 'Experience' is thus treated by liberalism as something which is homogeneous, common and unchanging, unaffected by alterations in religious affiliations – in short, something *universal*, upon which theology may contruct itself in the public arena.

The transition from unbelief to faith would thus be held to involve a degree of existential reorientation, obliging an

experiential-expressivist theory of religion to account for this change. In that conversion is a highly significant element in human religious experience, past and present, the need to differentiate between 'believing' and 'unbelieving' experience would seem to be a sufficiently important aspect of religion to require theories of religion and doctrine to be able to account for it.

In the third place, a serious issue demands attention concerning the 'content' or 'referent' of an experience. How can we know that – how, in fact, can we even begin to enquire whether, and in what manner – the experience we are attempting to capture in a verbal moment or symbol really is an experience *of God*?[63] What grounds do we have for suggesting that human experience is in some way related to a reality, traditionally designated 'God'? On what grounds are we entitled to identify a moment or moments as charged with the fragrance of divinity, and not simply an experience which is human and mundane? The great dilemma of the young Karl Barth, preparing his Sunday sermon at Safenwil, becomes our dilemma. For Barth, the crucial question concerned the words he would preach: how could he rest assured that these words in some way embodied or conveyed the word *of God*, rather than his own words? In what sense could he claim that he was proclaiming the word *of God*, and not merely lending a spurious legitimacy and unmerited authority to the words of Karl Barth? How can the 'experience seeking expression' be identified as an experience of God, and not as an experience of a secular and godless world, or an eccentric existential solipsism? And what of non-theistic religions? Doubtless an experiential-expressive account of Theravada Buddhism would insist that this tradition gives access to religious experience – but can it be regarded as an experience *of God*, when that tradition itself explicitly repudiates such a suggestion? Experience may indeed seek expression – but it also demands a criterion by which it may be judged.

This point could be developed further, particularly in the light of the trend towards secularism in western society. The 'experiential-expressive' approach to religion and doctrine asserts the primacy of present experience as the medium of God's revelation. The implicit presupposition of this approach is that there is some

experience to express – for example, Schleiermacher's notion of piety as a sense of absolute dependence, Otto's category of the numinous, and Tillich's experience of the unconditioned. But what if there is no experience to express? If God is experienced as absent from his world – which Bonhoeffer suggests is the inevitable result in a 'world come of age'[64] – in what sense can we affirm that he is *present*? Luther, taking the event of the crucifixion as a paradigm, argues that experience is *corrected* by doctrine; that experience is properly interpreted, even to the point of being contradicted, by and within a theological framework. Experience, in other words, is the *explicandum*, rather than the *explicans*; it is what requires to be interpreted, rather than the interpreting agent itself. God is experienced as absent; doctrine affirms that God is present in a hidden manner.[65] Theology engages with human experience; yet experience often needs to be criticized and radically *re*interpreted. This is a major theme of Luther's 'theology of the cross'.[66] For Luther, the cross mounts a powerful attack on another human resource upon which too much spiritual weight is often placed, especially in modern western thought. The experience of the individual is singled out as having revelatory authority. 'What I experience is what is right.' 'I don't experience it that way.' Luther suggests that individual experience is often seriously unreliable as a guide to matters of faith. The way we experience things is not necessarily the way things really are.

It is this potential *tension* between theology and experience which raises such difficulties for liberal writers such as David Tracy and Schubert Ogden. As has often been pointed out, the model offered by such theologians systematically minimizes both 'the historical particularity of the [Christian] tradition as well as the force of its conflict with experience'.[67] For such reasons, the second approach outlined above to the understanding of the relation between experience and theology has regained a hearing.

According to this approach, experience is an *explicandum*, something which itself requires to be interpreted. Christian theology provides a framework by which the ambiguities of experience may be interpreted. Theology aims to interpret experience. It is like a net which we can cast over experience, in

order to capture its meaning. Experience is seen as something which is to be interpreted, rather than something which is itself capable of interpreting. Christian theology thus aims to *address*, *interpret* and *transform* human experience. In what follows, I propose to explore these themes with particular reference to the writings of Martin Luther and C. S. Lewis. European theology, with its long tradition of wrestling with experience within a cognitive framework, has an important contribution to make to this global discussion, of especial relevance in an experience-centred age.[68] Three points may be made.

First, theology addresses experience. Christian theology cannot remain faithful to its subject matter if it regards itself as purely propositional or cognitive in nature. The Christian encounter with God is transformative. As Calvin pointed out, to know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship, as the believer is caught up in a transforming and renewing encounter with the living God. To know God is to be changed by God.[69] As Søren Kierkegaard pointed out in his *Unscientific Postscript*, to know the truth is to be known by the truth. 'Truth' is something which affects our inner being, as we become involved in 'an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness'.[70]

This is in no sense to deny or to de-emphasize the cognitive aspects of Christian theology. It is merely to observe that there is more to theology than cerebralized information. A theology which touches the mind, leaving the heart unaffected, is no true Christian theology – a point stressed by both Luther and Calvin. Although Luther is critical of the role of experience in spirituality, he does not dismiss it as an irrelevance. Indeed, Luther insists that there is one experience which is basic to being a theologian. He describes this briefly in one of his most quoted (and most difficult!) statements. 'It is living, dying, and even being condemned which makes a theologian – not reading, speculating and understanding.'[71] To be a *real* theologian is to wrestle with none other than the living God – not with ideas about God, but with God himself. And how can a sinner ever hope to deal adequately with this God?

If you want to be a real theologian, Luther insists, you must have experienced a sense of condemnation. You must have had a

moment of insight, in which you realize just how sinful you really are, and how much you merit the condemnation of God. Christ's death on the cross spells out the full extent of God's wrath against sin, and shows us up as ones who are condemned. It is only from this point that we can fully appreciate the central theme of the New Testament – how God was able to deliver sinners from their fate. Without a full awareness of our sin, and the dreadful gulf this opens up between ourselves and God, we cannot appreciate the joy and wonder of the proclamation of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. In a letter to his colleague Philip Melanchthon, dated 13 January 1522, Luther suggested that he ask the so-called 'prophets' who were then confusing the faithful at Wittenberg the following question: 'Have they experienced spiritual distress and the divine birth, death and hell?' A list of spiritual sensations is no substitute for the terror that accompanies a real encounter with the living God. For these modern prophets, Luther wrote, 'the sign of the Son of man is missing'. Just about anyone can read the New Testament, and make some sort of sense of it. But, Luther insists, the *real* theologian is someone who has experienced a sense of condemnation on account of sin – who reads the New Testament, and realizes that the message of forgiveness is good news for him or her. The gospel is thus experienced as something liberating, something which transforms our situation, something which is relevant to us. It is very easy to read the New Testament as if it were nothing more than any other piece of literature. And Luther reminds us that it is only through being aware of our sin, and all its implications, that we can fully appreciate the wonder of the electrifying declaration that God has forgiven our sins through Jesus Christ.

Secondly, theology interprets experience. It is a consequence of the Christian doctrine of creation that we are made in the image of God. There is an inbuilt capacity – indeed, we might say, an inbuilt *need* – to relate to God. To fail to relate to God is to fail to be completely human. To be fulfilled is to be filled by God. Nothing that is transitory can ever fill this need. Nothing that is not itself God can ever hope to take the place of God. And yet, on account of the fallenness of human nature, there is now a natural tendency

to try to make other things fulfil this need.

Sin moves us away from God, and tempts us to substitute other things in his place. Created things thus come to be substituted for God. And they do not satisfy. And like the child who experiences and expresses dissatisfaction when the square peg fails to fit the round hole, so we experience a sense of dissatisfaction. Somehow, we are left with a feeling of longing – longing for *something* undefinable, of which human nature knows nothing, save that it does not possess it.

This phenomenon has been recognized since the dawn of human civilization. In one of his dialogues,[72] Plato compares human beings to leaky jars. Somehow, we are always unfulfilled. We may pour things into the containers of our lives, but something prevents them from ever being entirely filled. We are always partly empty – and for that reason, experience a profound awareness of a lack of fullness and happiness. 'Those who have endured the void know that they have encountered a distinctive hunger, or emptiness; nothing earthly satisfies it' (Diogenes Allen).[73] This well-documented feeling of dissatisfaction is one of the most important points of contact for the gospel proclamation. In the first place, that proclamation interprets this vague and unshaped feeling as a longing for *God*. It gives cognitive substance and shape to what would otherwise be an amorphous and unidentified subjective intuition. And in the second, it offers to fulfil it. There is a sense of divine dissatisfaction – not dissatisfaction *with* God, but a dissatisfaction with all that is not God, which arises from God, and which ultimately leads to God. Sartre is right: the world cannot bring fulfilment. Here he echoes the Christian view, which goes on to affirm that here, in the midst of the world, something which is ultimately beyond the world makes itself available to us. We do not need to wait for eternity to experience God; that experience can begin, however imperfectly, now. Perhaps the greatest statement of this feeling, and its most exquisite theological interpretation, may be found in the famous words of Augustine of Hippo: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'[74] There is a sense of homesickness for somewhere we have never visited, an intimation of a far-off land, which attracts us

despite the fact we do not know it.

Throughout Augustine's reflections, especially in the *Confessions*, the same theme recurs. We are doomed to remain incomplete in our present existence. Our hopes and deepest longings will remain nothing but hopes and longings. The resolution of this bitter-sweet tension remains real, even for the Christian, who becomes increasingly aware of the wonder of God, and of the inadequacy of our present grasp of that wonder. There is a sense of postponement, of longing, of wistful yearning, of groaning under the strain of having to tolerate the present, when the future offers so much.[75] The grand themes of creation and redemption there find a creative reworking which deserves careful attention. Because we are created by God in his image, we desire him; because we are sinful, we cannot satisfy that desire ourselves – either by substituting something for God, or by trying to coerce him to come to us. And so a real sense of frustration, of dissatisfaction, develops. And that dissatisfaction – but not its theological interpretation – is part of common human experience. Perhaps the finest statement of this exquisite agony is found in Augustine's cry that he 'is groaning with inexpressible groanings on my wanderer's path, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart lifted up towards it – Jerusalem my home land, Jerusalem my mother'.[76] We are exiled from our homeland – but its memories return hauntingly.

Augustine finds one of his finest recent apologetic interpreters in the Oxford literary critic and theologian C. S. Lewis. Perhaps one of the most original aspects of C. S. Lewis's writing is his persistent and powerful appeal to the religious imagination, in developing Augustine's maxim *desiderium sinus cordis* (longing makes the heart deep). Like Augustine, Lewis was aware of certain deep human emotions which pointed to a dimension of our existence beyond time and space. There is, Lewis suggested, a profound and intense feeling of longing within human beings, which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis terms this sense 'joy', and argues that it points to God as its source and goal (hence the title of his celebrated autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*). Joy, according to Lewis, is 'an unsatisfied desire which is itself more

desirable than any other satisfaction . . . anyone who has experienced it will want it again'.[77]

To understand Lewis at this point, the idea of 'joy' needs to be explained in some detail. From the windows of his home in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the young Lewis could see the distant Castlereagh Hills. Those distant hills seemed to him to symbolize something which lay beyond his reach. A sense of intense longing arose as he contemplated them. He could not say exactly *what* it was that he longed for; merely that there was a sense of emptiness within him, which the mysterious hills seemed to heighten, without satisfying. Lewis describes this experience (perhaps better known to students of German Romanticism as *Sehnsucht*) in some detail in his autobiography. He relates how, as a young child, he was standing by a flowering currant bush, when – for some unexplained reason – a memory was triggered off.

> There suddenly rose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden . . . comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past . . . and before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had only taken a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.[78]

Lewis here describes a brief moment of insight, a devastating moment of feeling caught up in something which goes far beyond the realms of everyday experience. But what did it mean? What, if anything, did it point to?

Lewis addressed this question in a remarkable sermon entitled

'The Weight of Glory', preached before the University of Oxford on 8 June 1941. Lewis spoke of 'a desire which no natural happiness will satisfy', 'a desire, still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies'. There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied. Lewis illustrates this from the age-old quest for beauty, using recognizably Augustinian imagery:

> The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.[79]

Human desire, the deep and bitter-sweet longing for something that will satisfy us, points beyond finite objects and finite persons (who seem able to fulfil this desire, yet eventually prove incapable of doing so) towards their real goal and fulfilment in God himself.

Pleasure, beauty, personal relationships: all seem to promise so much, and yet when we grasp them, we find that what we were seeking was not located in them, but lies beyond them. There is a 'divine dissatisfaction' within human experience, which prompts us to ask whether there is anything which may satisfy the human quest to fulfil the desires of the human heart. Lewis argues that there is. Hunger, he suggests, is an excellent example of a human sensation which corresponds to a real physical need. This need points to the existence of food by which it may be met. Simone Weil echoes this theme, and points to its apologetic importance when she writes: 'The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by

lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty.'[80]

Lewis's less perceptive critics – sadly, more numerous than one might have hoped – argued that his argument rested upon an elementary fallacy. Being hungry did not prove that there was bread at hand. The feeling of hunger did not necessarily correspond to a supply of food. Yet this objection, Lewis replies, misses the point.

> A man's physical hunger does not prove that man will get any bread; he may died of starvation in a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called 'falling in love' occurred in a sexless world.[81]

In all this, Lewis echoes a great theme of traditional Christian thinking about the origin and goal of human nature. We are made by God, and we experience a deep sense of longing for him, which only he can satisfy. Although Lewis's reflections on the desire he calls 'joy' reflect his personal experience, it is evident that he (and countless others) consider that this sense of longing is a widespread feature of human nature and experience. An important point of contact for the proclamation of the gospel is thus established.

Lewis's insights also bring new depth to familiar biblical passages concerning human longing for God. 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God' (Ps. 42:1–2). Note the great sense of *longing* for God expressed in this verse – a sense of longing which assumes added meaning if Lewis's reflections on 'joy' are allowed. Note also the biblical parallel between a sense of need – in this case, animal thirst – and the human need and desire for God.

Thirdly, theology offers to transform experience. Christian theology does not simply address the human situation; it offers to

transform it. We are not simply told that we are sinners, in need of divine forgiveness and renewal; that forgiveness and renewal are offered to us in the gospel proclamation. If the negative aspect of the Christian proclamation of the crucified Christ is that we are far from God, the positive side is that God offers to bring us home to himself through the death and resurrection of his Son. Theology, then, does not simply interpret our experience in terms of alienation from God. It addresses that experience, interprets it as a sign of our global alienation from God through sin, and offers to transform it through the grace of God.

One of the many merits of the writings of C. S. Lewis is that they take seriously the way in which words can *generate* and *transform* experience. For Lewis, words have the ability to evoke an experience we have not yet had, in addition to describing an experience we are familiar with. That which is known functions as a signpost to that which is yet to be known, and which lies within our grasp. In his essay *The Language of Religion*, Lewis made this crucial point as follows.

> This is the most remarkable of the powers of Poetic language: to convey to us the quality of experiences which we have not had, or perhaps can never have, to use factors within our experience so that they become pointers to something outside our experience – as two or more roads on a map show us where a town that is off the map must lie. Many of us have never had an experience like that which Wordsworth records near the end of *Prelude* XIII; but when he speaks of 'the visionary dreariness', I think we get an inkling of it.[82]

At its best, Christian theology shares this characteristic of poetic language (not *poetry* itself, incidentally, Lewis stresses, but the *language used in poetry*), as identified by Lewis – it tries to convey to us the quality of the Christian experience of God. It attempts to point beyond itself, to rise above itself, straining at its lead as it rushes ahead, to point us to a town beyond its map – a town which it knows is there, but to which it cannot lead us.

Theology is able to use words in such a way as to offer some

pointers for the benefit of those who have yet to discover what it feels like to experience God. It uses a cluster of key words to try and explain what it is like to know God, by analogy with words associated with human experience. It is like forgiveness – in other words, if you can imagine what it feels like to be forgiven for a really serious offence, you can begin to understand the Christian experience of forgiveness. It is like reconciliation – if you can imagine the joy of being reconciled to someone who matters very much to you, you can get a glimpse of what the Christian experience of coming home to God is like. It is like coming home after being away and alone for a long time, and perhaps fully expecting never to be able to return. Apologetics uses analogies like these to try and signpost – like roads leading off Lewis's map to an unseen town – the Christian experience of God, for the benefit of those who have yet to have this transforming experience.

In this section, I have argued that there is no rightful place in Christian theology for any approach that is purely cognitive or purely experiential. Experience and understanding are like two sides of the same coin, which reinforce and enhance one another. The liberal appeal to pure uninterpreted global experience is widely regarded as discredited, partly on account of the considerations noted by George Lindbeck and others, and partly on account of a new awareness of the implications of the philosopy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. As Stanley Hauerwas remarked, 'Wittgenstein ended forever any attempt on my part to try to anchor theology in some general account of human experience.'[83]

Yet this widespead disenchantment with experience as a theological resource must not allow us to reject a significant experiential component in theological reflection. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, experience is a vital 'point of contact' for Christian apologetics in a postmodern world.[84] Rather, we must insist that experience is to be addressed, interpreted and transformed in the light of the gospel proclamation of redemption through Christ, as this is made known to us through Scripture. By thus anchoring theology in the bedrock of divine revelation, while linking it up to the world of human experience, we may ensure that Christian theology remains both authentic and relevant in the

years that lie ahead. Theology can address experience, without becoming reduced to the level of a mere reiteration of what we experience and observe.

3. Reason

With the rise of the Enlightenment came the demand that knowledge must be universally accessible. The idea of a 'privileged' knowledge of God, mediated only by revelation, was rejected on moral grounds. As revelation was not universal, it was argued, God was causing moral problems by limiting revelation to the person of Jesus Christ, the text of Scripture, or the domain of the church. The Enlightenment argued that any such suggestion was to be rejected as constituting a 'scandal of particularity'.[85] Such knowledge had to be universally accessible, in all cultures, historical contexts, and geographical regions. For the Enlightenment, reason provided exactly such a universally valid resource. Everyone had a rational faculty; therefore everyone could use it, and thereby gain access to knowledge of God.

The eighteenth-century rationalist writer G. E. Lessing thus dismissed any idea that Jesus Christ could be of determinative status for Christian theology on account of his conviction that human reason alone could assume such a normative role. His famous declaration that 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason'[86] rests on the characteristic Enlightenment assumption that the only significant form of knowledge consists of the 'necessary truths of reason'. A similar outlook can be shown to undergird the writings of Spinoza, who argued that it was possible to establish fundamental rational truths as axioms, and then to deduce an entire ethical or theological system on their basis, in much the same way as Euclid deduced an entire geometric system from fundamental axioms. As Stephen Toulmin pointed out, the attraction of mathematical logic to writers such as Descartes and Spinoza lay partly in the fact that it was seen to be 'possibly the only intellectual activity whose problems and solutions are above time'.[87]

Yet this approach is now widely regarded as fatally flawed. The 'necessary truths of reason' now turn out to mean little more than

'tautologies', or 'things that are true by definition'. Indeed, precisely this point lay at the heart of Ludwig Wittgenstein's critique of the philosophy of Bertrand Russell. As was pointed out in 1895 by Lewis Carroll, every attempt at rational justification by deduction turns out to be circular, in that the application of the process of deduction presupposes that this process of deduction is itself valid.[88]

Furthermore, discovery of non-Euclidian geometries during the nineteenth century destroyed the parallel between geometry and theology. It turned out that there were other ways of doing geometry, each just as internally consistent as Euclid's. Euclid laid down one set of axioms; others chose to lay down a different set, each giving rise to a different geometric system. But which set of axioms is right? Which system is valid? The question cannot be answered. They were all different, each with their own especial merits and problems.[89] Where once there was only geometry, there were now geometries.

The same criticisms were directed against ethics. Spinoza believed that the systematic application of pure reason would lead to an acontextual universally valid ethical system, independent of space and time. Enlightenment writers believed that this rational morality was accessible to human reason, relativizing all other ethical norms, including the moral example and teaching of Jesus Christ. Even as late as the 1950s, R. M. Hare could speak of 'the language of morals' as if there were only one such language.[90] But not any more. It is now widely accepted that there is a variety of ethical systems, each with its own vision of the nature and destiny of humanity. The Enlightenment dream of a universal morality is over.

In a similar manner, the Enlightenment assumption that there was only one 'rationality', independent of time, space and culture, is no longer regarded as having any credibility. Where once it was argued that there was one single rational principle, it is now conceded that there are – and always have been – many different 'rationalities'. As Stephen Toulmin pointed out, 'the exercise of rational judgement is itself an activity carried out in a particular context and essentially dependent on it; the arguments we

encounter are set out at a given time and in a given situation, and when we come to assess them they have to be judged against this background'.[91] Many Enlightenment thinkers appear to have been shielded from this disconcerting fact by the limitations of their historical scholarship, which remained firmly wedded to the classical western tradition. But this illusion has now been shattered. At the end of his brilliant analysis of rational approaches to knowledge and ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre concludes:

> Both the thinkers of the Enlightenment and their successors proved unable to agree as to precisely what those principles were which would be found undeniable by all rational persons. One kind of answer was given by the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, a second by Rousseau, a third by Bentham, a fourth by Kant, a fifth by the Scottish philosophers of common sense and their French and American disciples. Nor has subsequent history diminished the extent of such disagreement. Consequently, the legacy of the Enlightenment has been the provision of an ideal of rational justification which it has proved impossible to attain.[92]

Reason promises much, yet fails to deliver its benefits. It is for such reasons that Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote scathingly of the 'Robinson Crusoe dream of the historical Enlightenment, as artificial as Crusoe himself'.[93] The notion of 'universal rationality' is a fiction, a dream, and a delusion. Philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend takes the consequences of the collapse of belief in a single, universal rationality to its obvious conclusion in his famous comparison between the primitive tribe and the rationalists: 'There is hardly any difference between the members of a primitive tribe who defend their laws because they are the laws of the gods . . . and a rationalist who appeals to objective standards, except that the former know what they are doing while the latter does not.'[94] The comparison has alarmed many; it has, however, yet to be refuted by a philosopher of science.

At this point, we need to stress the difference between 'reason' and 'rationalism', which may appear identical to some. *Reason* is

the basic human faculty of thinking, based on argument and evidence. It is theologically neutral, and poses no threat to faith – unless it is regarded as the only source of knowledge about God. It then becomes *rationalism*, which is an exclusive reliance upon human reason alone, and a refusal to allow any weight to be given to divine revelation. Classical Christian theology, including all responsible evangelical theology, makes full use of the human faculty of reasoning – for example, in thinking through the implications of certain aspects of God's self-revelation. For example, consider the role of reason in exploring the relation between a functional and ontological Christology: if Jesus is our Saviour, yet only God can save, reason suggests that Jesus must (in some sense of the word) be God. Yet here reason is reflecting upon revelation, and seeking to explore further its implications. Rationalism declares that all thinking about God must be based upon human reason, thus immediately locking theology into the fallen human situation, with no possibility of being extricated from our confusion and distortion by God himself.

How did this remarkable – and, it must be said, totally misplaced – confidence in reason in matters of religion develop? Three stages can be identified, each leading naturally into that which follows.

1. Initially, it was argued that, as the gospel was rational, it was entirely proper to demonstrate that Christianity made sense, and rested upon thoroughly reasonable foundations. For example, Aquinas argued that Christian belief in God did not involve some kind of intellectual suicide, by providing five lines of reasoning which showed that this belief was entirely reasonable. But Aquinas, and the Christian tradition which he represented, did not for one moment believe that Christianity was limited to what could be ascertained by reason. Faith goes beyond reason, having access to truths and insights of revelation, which reason could not hope to fathom or discover unaided.

The noted historian of medieval Christian thought, Etienne Gilson, made a delightful comparison between the great theological systems of the Middle Ages and the cathedrals which sprang up throughout Christian Europe at this time: the systems were, he

remarked, 'cathedrals of the mind'. Christianity is like a cathedral which rests upon the bedrock of human reason, but whose superstructure rises beyond the realms accessible to pure reason. It rests upon rational foundations; but the building erected on that foundation went far beyond what reason could uncover. Thus Aquinas argued that Christianity was based upon a knowledge which, although rational, transcended human abilities, and was thus mediated solely through revelation.[95] John Calvin, a later representative and interpreter of this approach, suggested that reason was perfectly capable of arriving at a knowledge of God the creator. But real knowledge of God – *saving* knowledge of God – could be had only through revelation. Knowledge of God the redeemer was a matter of revelation, not reason. This knowledge did not contradict knowledge of God the creator; it brought it to perfection, by showing that the God who once created the world subsequently acted to redeem it.

2. By the middle of the seventeenth century, especially in England and Germany, a new attitude began to develop. Christianity, it was argued, was reasonable. But where Thomas Aquinas understood this to mean that faith rested securely upon rational foundations, the new school of thought had different ideas. If faith is rational, they argued, it must be capable of being deduced in its entirety by reason. Every aspect of faith, every item of Christian belief, must be shown to derive from human reason.

An excellent example of this approach may be found in the writings of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, especially *De veritatis religionis*, which argued for a rational Christianity based upon the innate sense of God and human moral obligation. This had two major consequences. First, Christianity was in effect *reduced* to those ideas which could be proven by reason. If Christianity was rational, then any parts of its system which could not be proved by reason could not be counted as 'rational'. They would have to be discarded. And second, reason was understood to take priority over Christianity. Reason comes first, Christianity comes second. Reason is capable of establishing what is right without needing any assistance from revelation; Christianity has to follow, being accepted where it endorses what reason has to say, and being

disregarded where it goes its own way. So why bother with the idea of revelation, when reason could tell us all we could possibly wish to know about God, the world, and ourselves? This absolutely settled conviction in the total competence of human reason underlies the rationalist depreciation of the Christian doctrine of revelation in Jesus Christ and through Scripture.

This approach to Christianity (or, more accurately, this form of Deism tinged with faintly Christian hues) treats God as an idea, a construction of the human mind. God is something which is posited, an idea which we generate within our minds, and then choose to call 'God'. We have created this idea. It is the work of our own minds. But traditional Christianity argued that God could not simply be posited in this crudely rationalist manner. God has to be experienced, he has to be encountered. He is one who engages us and, by engaging us, forces us to re-evaluate our ideas concerning him. Yet the God of pure reason is trapped within the limits of human minds. And small minds make for a small God.

3. Finally, this rationalist position was pushed to its logical outcome. As a matter of fact, it was argued, Christianity includes some beliefs which are inconsistent with reason. And as reason must be regarded as having final authority in matters of faith, where Scripture is in disagreement with reason, it is to be regarded as mistaken or misleading. God, having been posited by human reason, is thus now deposited by its own creator.[96]

As a result of the sociological deconstruction of the notion of 'universal reason', the appeal to 'the authority of reason' is made with much less conviction today.[97] A fundamental belief in the rationality of the Christian faith remains intact and justified; the Enlightenment attempt to establish unaided human reason as the sole normative foundation for all insight is now seen as seriously flawed. In part, this recognition stems from the realization of the limitations placed on reason; in part, however, it also arises from the postmodern awareness of the potentially authoritarian consequences of an appeal to the 'totalization of reason' (see pp. 179–189). 'Being reasonable' is not reducible to a single method, and can easily lead to the 'tyranny of rationality' through the assertion that only *this* way of thinking, or only *this* type of argument, has

any validity. And, as postmodern writers have stressed (see pp. 189–196), 'being reasonable' all too often amounts to a demand to 'accept *my* way of thinking'.

The recognition that frameworks of rationality are not universal, but are socially and historically located, is of considerable importance to Christian theology, particularly in assessing the significance of Enlightenment rationalism. For example, consider the Enlightenment criticism of the traditional Christian notion of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For Lessing, this notion was unacceptable, in that it denied access to such 'revelation' to those whose historical location was, for example, chronologically prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The force of this objection, one assumes, is primarily moral, in that the *accessibility* of truth has no direct bearing upon its accuracy. For Lessing, this point served to highlight the moral superiority of rational religion, which was able to make an appeal to the universal truths of reason.

With the advent of the insights of the sociology of knowledge, the advantages of Lessing's position are seriously eroded, probably to the point of rendering them specious. 'Universal truths of reason' may indeed be found within the somewhat restricted confines of logic and mathematics, even if they amount to nothing more than tautologies – restatements masquerading as explanations or new levels of insight. Patterns of rationality in general, however, are socially and historically located and conditioned. 'Reason' must be taken to refer to those frameworks of rationality and preconceived notions of self-evident truths appropriate to specific social groupings at specific moments in history, rather than some universal and perennial feature of human ratiocination. Precisely the same criticism directed by Reimarus against Christianity may be laid against Lessing's appeal to the fictitious notion of universal reason: the social location of an individual determines the intellectual options open to him or her. 'Reason' and 'revelation' are both subject to the limitations of historicity.

4. Tradition

For some writers, 'tradition' has considerable authority. Tradition would here be understood to designate a traditional doctrine or

belief, which has binding force on account of its antiquity. Yet this can easily degenerate into an uncritical sentimentality. 'We've always believed this' can simply mean 'We've always been wrong.' As the third-century writer Cyprian of Carthage pointed out, 'an ancient tradition can just be an old mistake'. Tradition is to be honoured where it can be shown to be justified, and rejected where it cannot. This critical appraisal of tradition was an integral element of the Reformation,[98] and was based on the foundational belief that tradition was ultimately an interpretation of Scripture which had to be justified with reference to that same authoritative source.

Yet the idea of 'tradition' is of importance to modern evangelicalism. Evangelicals have always been prone to read Scripture as if they were the first to do so. We need to be reminded that others have been there before us, and have read it before us. This process of receiving the scriptural revelation is 'tradition' – not a source of revelation in addition to Scripture, but a particular way of understanding Scripture which the Christian church has recognized as responsible and reliable. Scripture and tradition are thus not to be seen as two alternative sources of revelation; rather they are *coinherent*. Scripture cannot be read as if it had never been read before. The hymnodies and liturgies of the churches constantly remind us that Scripture has been read, valued and interpreted in the past. James I. Packer, one of the most influential evangelical writers of recent years, stresses this point:

> The Spirit has been active in the Church from the first, doing the work he was sent to do – guiding God's people into an understanding of revealed truth. The history of the Church's labour to understand the Bible forms a commentary on the Bible which we cannot despise or ignore without dishonouring the Holy Spirit. To treat the principle of biblical authority as a prohibition against reading and learning from the book of church history is not an evangelical, but an anabaptist mistake.[99]

'Tradition' is thus rightly understood (for example, by the Reformers such as Luther) as a history of discipleship – of reading, interpreting and wrestling with Scripture. Tradition is a willingness

to read Scripture, taking into account the ways in which it has been read in the past. It is an awareness of the communal dimension of Christian faith, over an extended period of time, which calls the shallow individualism of many evangelicals into question. There is more to the interpretation of Scripture than any one individual can discern. It is a willingness to give full weight to the views of those who have gone before us in the faith, providing forceful reminders of the *corporate* nature of the Christian faith, including the interpretation of Scripture.

At first sight, this emphasis on the importance of the community of faith might seem to be in tension with the belief that it is Scripture alone which is authoritative. But this principle was never intended by writers such as Luther or Calvin to mean that Scripture is read *individualistically*. It was not meant to elevate the private judgment of an individual above the communal judgment of the church (although it was interpreted in this way by certain radical reformers, outside the mainstream of the Reformation). Rather, it affirms that every traditional way of reading Scripture must, in principle, be open to challenge. As the study of church history makes clear, the church may sometimes get Scripture wrong: the sixteenth-century reformers believed that Scripture had been misunderstood at a series of junctures by the medieval church, and undertook to reform its practices and doctrines at those points. This, however, is a case of a tradition being criticized and renewed from within, in the light of the biblical foundations upon which it ultimately rests, and is recognized to rest. The Reformers did not regard themselves as founding a new tradition; their concern was to reform a tradition which already existed, but which appeared to have become detached from its scriptural foundations.

The principle of the authority of Scripture over even its most prestigious interpreters is vigorously upheld by the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577):

> We believe, teach and confess that there is only one rule and norm according to which all teachings and teachers are to be appraised and judged, which is none other than the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments . . .

> Other writings, whether of the fathers or more recent theologians, no matter what their names may be, cannot be regarded as possessing equal status to Holy Scripture, but must all be considered to be subordinate to it, and to witness to the way in which the teaching of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times and in different parts of the world . . . Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule and norm according to which all doctrines are to be understood and judged, as to which are good or evil, and which are true or truly false. Certain other creeds (*symbola*) and writings . . . do not themselves possess the authority of judges, as in the case of Holy Scripture, but are witnesses of our religion as to how [the Holy Scriptures] were explained and presented.[100]

For in part, the authority of Scripture rests in the universal acceptance of that authority within the Christian church. To recognize Scripture as authoritative is not the judgment of a group of individuals; it is the witness of the church down the ages. Among the many reasons which may be given for trusting the Bible (including the vitally important fact that it is inherently worthy of trust) must be included the simple fact that Scripture is trusted by the church.

In ascribing authority to Scripture, we are thus not merely recognizing and honouring God's decision to reveal himself to us, or only the specific form which this took in Jesus Christ; we are also honouring a living tradition, which has remained faithful to the modes of faith and life made known and made possible through Christ, and mediated through Scripture. There is thus a natural connection between the word of God and the people of God, and – whether this is recognized or not – a strongly ecclesiological element to our understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ.[101]

Biblical authority and biblical criticism

In our analysis thus far, considerable emphasis has been placed on the difficulties attending the utilization of theological authorities

Authority', *Interpretation* 44 (1990), pp. 353–368.
17. See the careful studies of Paul de Vooght, *Les sources de la doctrine chrétienne d'après les théologiens du XIVe siècle* (Paris, 1954), and Hermann Schüssler, *Der Primät der Heiligen Schrift als theologisches und kanonistisches Problem im Spätmittelalter* (Wiesbaden, 1977). More generally, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 122–174; George Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 22–23.
18. For the exploration of the direct and indirect influence of Scripture at this time, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (3rd edn., Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).
19. Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM, 1980), p. 9.
20. See the often-cited study of Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).
21. On this, see R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Mystery of Continuity: Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of St Augustine* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1986).
22. See Paul Althaus, *Die deutsche Stunde der Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933). For a vigorous critique of the theology which prioritized German history in this way, see Ernst Wolf, *Barmen: Kirche zwischen Versuchung und Gnade* (2nd edn., Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1970).
23. For the text of this document, see Gerhard Niemöller, *Die erste Bekenntnissynode der Deutschen Evangelischen Kirche zu Barmen* (2 vols., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 142–146.
24. See the disquieting analysis of Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). The case of Emanuel Hirsch (1888–1972), who openly supported the Nazis, is especially significant (see Ericksen, pp. 120–197). For further documentation, see the series *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Kirchenkampfes* (Göttingen and Zurich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht).
25. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), pp. 24–25.
26. Wilfried Härle, 'Der Aufruf der 93 Intellektuellen und Karl Barths Bruch mit der liberalen Theologie', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 72 (1975), pp. 207–224. More generally, see Wolfgang Huber, 'Evangelische Theologie und Kirche beim Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs', *Studien zur Friedensforschung* 4 (1970), pp. 148–215.
27. Karl Barth, *Evangelische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Zollikon, 1957), p. 6. See further Härle, 'Der Aufruf der 93 Intellektuellen und Karl Barths Bruch mit der liberalen Theologie'.
28. For the post-Stalinist period, see Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
29. Further documentation of this point is impossible within the space available.

The kind of approach I would be inclined to follow is mapped out in Alister E. McGrath, 'Christian Ethics', in *The Religion of the Incarnation: Anglican Essays in Commemoration of Lux Mundi* (Bristol: Bristol Classic Press, 1989), pp. 189–204.
30. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).
31. *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth* (12 vols., Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company, 1910–15).
32. The definitive study remains George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
33. Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, pp. 108–25.
34. John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992).
35. N. T. Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 65–92.
36. Wright, *Who was Jesus?*, pp. 91–92.
37. Gordon Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 15. See also his appeal to a concept of God rooted in western culture in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), pp. 22–23.
38. See H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
39. See William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
40. See, for example, Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).
41. See especially Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 53–54.
42. Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: Free Press, 1992), pp. 10–11.
43. Berger, *A Far Glory*, p. 12 (emphasis in original).
44. W. R. Inge, *Diary of a Dean* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), p. 12.
45. Eugene B. Borowitz, 'The Enduring Truth of Religious Liberalism', in N. J. Cohen (ed.), *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 230–247; quote at p. 231.
46. This is the central theme of his major work, *Die gegenwärtige geistige Lage im Spiegel philosophischer und theologischer Besinnung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934), which was written in response to the events of 1933.
47. For a useful analysis, see Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933). The best general study, from a philosophical standpoint, is Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985). For a more theological approach, see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM, 1988).

48. See Gerhard Ebeling, 'Die Klage über das Erfahrungsdefizit in der Theologie als Frage nach ihrer Sache', *Wort und Glaube III* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), pp. 3–28.
49. For a useful study, see C. Stephen Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1976).
50. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). For an assessment and critique, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 14–34, and especially pp. 136–161 of the present study.
51. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 32.
52. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 23.
53. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 17.
54. See the useful analysis of William P. Alston, 'Christian Experience and Christian Belief', in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 103–134.
55. Gerhard E. Spiegler, *The Eternal Covenant: Schleiermacher's Experiment in Cultural Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 136–156.
56. B. R. F. Lonergan, *Philosophy of God and Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), p. 50.
57. It must be noted at this point that Lonergan is heavily dependent upon the somewhat questionable conclusions (*e.g.* that the 'higher religions' derive from the same common core experience of transcendence) of the Chicago writer Friedrich Heiler.
58. See Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 148–175.
59. For a penetrating account of the importance of 'conversion', see Paula Fredsen, 'Paul and Augustine', *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986), pp. 3–34. Note especially the emphasis on a break or discontinuity with the past.
60. Fraser Watts and Mark Williams, *The Psychology of Religious Knowing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 10–23. On the distinction between 'committed' and 'consensual', see R. O. Allen and B. Spilka, 'Committed and Consensual Religion', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 (1967), pp. 191–206.
61. Watts and Williams, *Psychology of Religious Knowing*, pp. 109–127.
62. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 128.
63. Many 'experiential-expressive' accounts of doctrine would presumably dismiss this anxiety as pointless, given their non-cognitive understanding of the concept of revelation: see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1983), pp. 98–114. For a careful analysis of experience as a theological resource, see Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*.
64. See the letter to Eberhard Bethge, dated 16 July 1944, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge (New York: Macmillan, and London: SCM, 1971), pp. 359–361.
65. On the theme of the 'hidden God' in Luther's early theology, see John

Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1953); McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, pp. 161–175.
66. For what follows, see McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. For the implications of this approach for Christian spirituality, see Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992); North American edition published as *Spirituality in an Age of Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994).
67. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1984), p. 283.
68. For other reflections on European theology, see Alister E. McGrath, 'The European Roots of Evangelicalism', *Anvil* 9 (1992), pp. 239–248.
69. On Calvin's understanding of the dialectic between theology and experience, see Wilhelm Balke, 'The Word of God and *Experientia* according to Calvin', in W. H. Neuser (ed.), *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), pp. 19–31.
70. Søren Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 169–224. *Cf.* P. L. Holmer, 'Kierkegaard and Religious Propositions', *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955), pp. 135–146.
71. *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1885), 163.28–29. For a full discussion, see McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, pp. 148–152.
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74. Augustine, *Confessions*, I.i.1. Citations are from the recent translation by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.
75. For a superb presentation of Augustine's thoughts on this tension, see John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study in the Religion of St Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), pp. 52–73.
76. *Confessions*, XII.xvi.23; Chadwick, p. 257.
77. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 20.
78. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 19.
79. C. S. Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', in *Screwtape Proposes A Toast* (London: Collins, 1965), pp. 97–98.
80. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951), p. 210.
81. Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', p. 99.
82. C. S. Lewis, 'The Language of Religion', in *Christian Reflections* (London: Collins, 1981), p. 169.
83. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. xxi.
84. See Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992). North American edition published as *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993).
85. On this, see Gabriel Fackre, 'The Scandals of Particularity and Universality',

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86. G. E. Lessing, 'Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft', in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessings sämtlichen Schriften*, vol. 13, ed. Karl Lachmann (Berlin: Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1897), 5.34–36.
87. Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 127.
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93. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), p. 271.
94. Paul K. Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 82. For a more restrained exposition of such points, see his *Against Method* (3rd edn., London: Verso, 1993). The collection of essays entitled *Farewell to Reason* (London: Verso, 1987) is also of importance.
95. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia*, Ia q. 1 aa. 1, 8.
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97. See the careful and insightful analysis by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (2nd edn., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).
98. See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), pp. 140–151.
99. James I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958; reissued, Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p. 48. For further reflections on the positive role of tradition for evangelicalism, see James I. Packer, 'The Comfort of Conservatism', in M. J. Horton (ed.), *Power Religion* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 283–299.
100. *Epitome*, 1–8; in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (2nd edn., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952), 767.14 – 769.34.
101. See John Milbank, 'The Name of Jesus: Incarnation, Atonement, Ecclesiology', *Modern Theology* 7 (1991), pp. 311–333.
102. David L. Edwards with John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), p. 73. The discussion of evangelical beliefs in this book is especially illuminating.
103. I. Howard Marshall is a case in point, through his study *Biblical Inspiration* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1982). For some other discussions of inspiration from an evangelical viewpoint, see Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God*. For other discussions of biblical inspiration which are helpful from an evangelical perspective, see P. J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); W. J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); K. R. Trembath, *Evangelical Theories of Biblical Inspiration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
104. William Barclay, writing at a popular level, was a fine scholar who rationalized the miracles. Gerd Theissen at least hints at such rationalization in his splendid book *The Shadow of the Galilean* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 120. For evangelical scholarly discussion of such miracles, see David Wenham and Craig Blomberg (eds.), *Gospel Perspectives* 6: *The Miracles of Jesus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986).
105. On the two-source theory, see among others E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989); on the parables, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990).
106. Walter Wink, *Transforming Bible Study* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980), p. 155.
107. W. Robertson Smith, *Answer to the Form of Libel* (Edinburgh: Douglas, 1878), p. 21.
108. See the discussion in Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 169–224.
109. For the phrase, see James Houston, *The Transforming Friendship* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1993). More generally, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 78–80. For a consideration of the relation of Scripture and doctrine, see pp. 52–66.
110. See John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, 'J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), pp. 133–158; Magne Saebo, 'Johann Philip Gablers Bedeutung für die Biblische Theologie', *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft* 99 (1987), pp. 1–16.
111. For a detailed survey, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Die Biblische Theologie: Ihre Geschichte und Problematik* (Neukirchen and Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970); at a more popular level, see Krister Stendahl, 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 418–432.
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