

- 93 Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 12.
- 94 Epistemological as opposed to procedural.
- 95 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 13.
- 96 With the collapse of the Newtonian mechanistic world view that was static, the new science of relativity, with its dynamic fourth dimensional comprehension of reality, has not only opened up new possibilities for authentic epistemology but also contributed to Process theology of John Cobb and Charles Hartshorne, based upon the philosophy of Alfred Whitehead. See Hopper, 1:93-94. For an evaluation of Process theology, see Norman R. Gulley, "An Influential Force in Contemporary Theology," *Adventist Perspectives*, 2:1, (1988), pp. 11-34.
- 97 T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 83.
- 98 Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, pp. 84-90; Karl Heim, *The Transformation of the Scientific World View* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953), p. 76.
- 99 This refers to epistemological idealism and not to ontological idealism.
- 100 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 21.
- 101 Karl Heim, *The Transformation of the Scientific World View* (NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953).
- 102 Heim, pp. 17-24.
- 103 Even though Einstein was a determinist.
- 104 Heim, p. 127.
- 105 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 80.
- 106 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), p. ix.
- 107 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 81.
- 108 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1978), p. xxi.

*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 4/2 (1993):161-171.  
Article copyright © 1993 by John T. Baldwin.

## HISTORICIZATION AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL METHOD

By John T. Baldwin

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Andrews University

"The great question is that of method, everything else follows in due course," Arthur Samuel Peake.<sup>1</sup>

This essay discusses three epoch-making moments of historicization,<sup>2</sup> crafted respectively by Friedrich Schleiermacher, Charles Darwin, and Alfred North Whitehead, which have radically shaped not only liberal, but also aspects of evangelical Christian theological method. The study reflects upon the challenges presented by these three moments to Adventist theological method. It concludes by suggesting three methodological presuppositions needed to give shape to a fruitful Adventist approach to theology.

### Schleiermacher's Impact on Method

The first moment to be considered is the remarkable historicization of Christian doctrine by the father of modern liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher. Taking his cue in part from philosophical signals from Descartes and Kant, Schleiermacher, articulates his own turn to the subject in a theological shift which serves as the basis for a radical change in theological method still followed by many leading contemporary academic Christian theologians.

In the second speech entitled "The Nature of Religion" printed in his *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 1799, we find the basis of Schleiermacher's theological turn to the subject in his famous definition of religion: "[R]eligion is the sense and taste for

the infinite."<sup>3</sup> This definition turns the human being inward, as Karl Barth snorted, to some supposed innate and essential capacity to "sense and taste the infinite"<sup>4</sup> as a ground for the shape and content of religious doctrine. What is the implication of this turn to the subject for theological method?

First, the inward datum becomes the ground for dogmatic propositions or Christian doctrines, which means that dogmatics must be formulated within the limits of piety alone.<sup>5</sup> For example, in proposition 29 of the *Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher states, "We shall exhaust the whole compass of Christian doctrine if we consider the facts of the religious self-consciousness."<sup>6</sup> And again, "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech."<sup>7</sup> This means, as Brian Gerrish correctly observes, that for Schleiermacher, piety functions as a dogmatic limit "because a specific modification of piety is what dogmatics is all about."<sup>8</sup>

Second, by grounding dogmatics on piety, i.e., on the turn to the subject, Schleiermacher radically historicizes doctrine. This fact is made clear in the *Brief Outline On the Study Of Theology*, 1830, in which Schleiermacher tells us that dogmatic theology is the "knowledge of doctrine now current in the evangelical Church."<sup>9</sup> By this he means (as stated in proposition 19 in *The Christian Faith*) that "dogmatic theology is the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in a Christian Church at a given time."<sup>10</sup> By grounding doctrine on the piety of the human subject, he caused the object of theology to become "the changing consciousness of the Christian community, something continually mobile and fluid."<sup>11</sup> This implies that doctrine can also change with the changing Christian consciousness.

Thus, the task of dogmatics in the traditional Christian sense of explicating the oracles of God as delivered in Scriptures is over. Why? Because there are no unchangeable divine truths to be expounded. An oracle of God or a dogma is a permanent embodiment of divine truth. This is gone once the basis of doctrine is linked to the "changing consciousness of the Christian community." This is precisely what Schleiermacher accomplished by his turn to the subject. In this manner Schleiermacher historicized doctrine.

Schleiermacher knew perfectly well that the shift he was

making was revolutionary.<sup>12</sup> This is indicated by the fact that he thought his theological endeavor required a new title; hence, he called his magnum opus, *Glaubenslehre* or teaching of faith, rather than calling it dogmatics. Dogmatics as a discipline is extinct in his system of thought, because the theologian has only the changing teachings of the faith of a religious community as the basis of doctrine rather than the unchanging propositional oracles of God written in Scripture.

What prompted Schleiermacher to adopt this distinctive theological method? In the second of his two explanatory communications written to his friend Dr. Lücke, which were public letters written to the German people after the initial unfavorable reception of the *Glaubenslehre*, Schleiermacher reveals the following significant motive which in part caused him to formulate the turn to the subject, thus historicizing doctrine:

I thought I should show as best I could that every dogma that truly represents an element of our Christian consciousness can be so formulated that it remains free from entanglements with science. I set this task for myself especially in my treatment of the doctrines of creation and preservation.<sup>13</sup>

This quotation shows that Schleiermacher sought to isolate Christian doctrine from the new discoveries of science which he perceived as being fatal to some Christian doctrines. He paid a very high price for this kind of harmony with science by cutting theological method loose from the absolute authority of Scripture and grounding it upon shifting Christian consciousness. The result has been the continuing differentiation of Christian doctrine to the present day.

In this connection, an observation by John M. McDermott concerning a central implication of Lonergan's theological method has equal relevance in evaluating the significance of Schleiermacher's method: "Once 'the turn to interiority' had been accomplished, it is hard to attribute primacy to any objective, historically manifested salvation. The 'touchstone' for judging the truth of doctrines has become the theologians's 'own authenticity'."<sup>14</sup>

A major implication stemming from this approach is that from Schleiermacher's day forward theologians standing in this tradi-



tion no longer practice theology after the manner of the magisterial reformers who presented what they believed God actually to have said in the Scripture. Rather, many leading modern theologians present a theology in their own name, taking, of course, into consideration all the teachings of the contemporary natural sciences. Thus, for example, a theologian such as Paul Tillich is not doing a biblical theology or telling us what God is saying to us in Scripture. Rather, Tillich is doing his own theology, a Tillichian theology. This theological autonomy is followed by liberal theologians of our day. We turn now to the second moment of historicization and its impact upon theological method.

#### Darwin's Influence on Theological Method

Launched opportunely in 1859 at a time when the world view within Christianity was undergoing radical revision, Darwin's *Origin of Species* effected the historicization of nature. Although evolutionary concepts can be traced to presocratic thinkers, Charles Darwin was the Julius Wellhausen of biology, the man of the hour. He not only presented a wealth of personal biological research, but also a mechanism of change, namely, natural selection, along with random change, whereby forms best suited to a particular habitat would survive. The concept basic to the Darwinian theory of nature is the acceptance of the natural mutability and development of species without divine guidance of any kind.

Heretofore, the Parmenidean notion of the permanence of the structures of nature enjoyed general acceptance over the Heraclitean notion of flux.<sup>15</sup> However, with Darwin we have a paradigmatic shift, in Kuhn's sense, from the Parmenidean to the Heraclitean view of nature. Parmenides, of course, was the Greek philosopher of being, or of rest,<sup>16</sup> whose orientation influenced Plato, and can be traced through the Stoics down to such modern philosophers as Kant and his Ding-an-sich.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher, advocated the concept of becoming as the fundamental reading of the world. Everything is forever *becoming*, nothing ever is. Heraclitus made the famous claim that no one can step twice into the same river because it is always changing and moving.<sup>18</sup> His view of flux can be traced, for example, from Aristotle through Hegel,<sup>19</sup> and now to Darwin who

argues in effect that nature itself is fluid and ever evolving. This implies, as Stephen Toulmin perceptively remarks, that natural science, including physical theory, "is finally engulfed in the same historical flux as the human and social sciences."<sup>20</sup>

What effect does this new view of reality have upon theology and its method? Langdon Gilkey pinpoints the impact in the following statement: "Our thesis, however, is that the most important change in the understanding of religious truth in the last centuries—a change that still dominates our thought today—has been caused more by the work of science than by any other factor, religious or cultural."<sup>21</sup> This statement implies that the historicization of nature has influenced Christian theology more than philosophy or any other cultural force—a claim which I strongly support.

Years before Gilkey's statement, Rudolf Bultmann made the same claim in an important article entitled "New Testament and Mythology" in which he stated that "all our thinking to-day is shaped for good or ill by modern science."<sup>22</sup> For Bultmann, Darwinian science had shown that the world view of the Bible was obsolete, a myth which must be removed. Thus, the theological method of "demythologizing" was born in large measure because of Darwin's historicization of nature.

Part of the so-called mythical framework which must be discarded, according to Bultmann, is belief in the literal second coming of Christ, and the reality of demonology. Bultmann writes about the coming of Christ as follows, "We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air."<sup>23</sup> Concerning demons he states that: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits."<sup>24</sup>

Schleiermacher's historicization of doctrine and Darwin's historicization of nature continue to influence not only the shape of liberal theology but also important sectors of evangelical Christianity. For example, Howard Van Till, professor of physics at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, accepts the tenets of theistic evolution in these words:

I believe that we may rightfully presume that the array of structures and lifeforms now present was not yet present at the beginning, but became actualized in the course of time as the created substances, employing the capacities thoughtfully given to them by God at the beginning, functioned in a gapless creational economy to bring about what the Creator called for and intended from the outset.<sup>25</sup>

These statements briefly show the impact which Schleiermacher and Darwin's historicization efforts have had upon Christian theological method and doctrine. We turn now to a third moment of historicization, namely, to Whitehead's historicization (in some sense) of God.

#### Whitehead's Changed View of God

Process theology has its philosophical roots in Alfred North Whitehead's challenging work, *Process and Reality*, in which he articulates a new metaphysical construction of reality within the Darwinian evolutionary framework of the radical historicization of nature. Nature is in process. However, God and our ever changing world of nature are interdependent in a necessary metaphysical sense, which means that God is neither chronologically prior to the world, nor unchanging with the world as the following discussion indicates.

In Whitehead's words, God is "the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality. . . . Not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation."<sup>26</sup> This means, in the words of a leading process theologian, John Cobb, Jr., that "Whitehead envisions no beginning of the world, hence no first temporal creation out of nothing."<sup>27</sup> Thus, the concept of *creation ex nihilo* disappears, because of what seems to be, in a qualified sense, a historicization of God.

Gone as well are aspects of the classical Christian views of the immutability,<sup>28</sup> omnipotence<sup>29</sup> and omniscience God.<sup>30</sup> For example, Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson describe the Whiteheadian understanding of the omniscience of God as follows: "Like humans, God knows the future only as possibility, never as actuality."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Whitehead leads us to the ultimate act of historicization when God, the Ultimate Reality, is finally in some sense historicized. This conclusion seems to suggest that the very essence of

God in some sense is changing.<sup>32</sup> Little wonder that Bruce A. Ware is puzzled by the position of some process theologians who claim on the one hand that God is ever-changing, but that God remains always loving.<sup>33</sup>

#### Critical Evaluation

In view of the three moments of historicization discussed in this article, namely, Schleiermacher's historicization of doctrine, Darwin's historicization of nature, and Whitehead's historicization in some sense of God, the challenge presented to the Seventh-day Adventist theologian in articulating the Three Angel's Messages, as historically understood, is clearly evident. Although limited space prevents our addressing the important issue of the truth-value of these three positions, we conclude by discussing the possible implications these shifts may carry for the shape and proclamation of the theology of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination by raising the following questions.

In what way is an Adventist pastor to preach an "everlasting gospel" (Rev 14:6) when Schleiermacher insists that there are no unchanging doctrines to be preached, i.e., that there are no truths once delivered to the saints to be passed on? Is it possible for the same pastor to be academically responsible and at the same time to proclaim the First Angel's message about the God who created the world, even in six days, in light of the fact that Darwin's historicization of nature suggests otherwise? In what consistent way may an evangelist appeal to listeners to accept the seventh-day Sabbath and to reject other days of worship as implored by the Third Angel's Message (Rev 14:9-12) in view of Whitehead's assertion that there was no creation *ex nihilo* and hence, by implication, no need of a weekly commemoration of an event which never occurred? In light of these concerns what shape should a theological method take which can function cogently with full academic responsibility as a proper foundation of the messages central to the Adventist church?

First, I suggest that an appropriate method may well take shape along the lines of an informed endorsement of basic Reformation hermeneutical principles, and so might be called a neo-classical biblical theological method. The labels one may use here are not of crucial importance, but the regulative principles are of deep



significance. In addition, the basic methodological shape, in my view, needs to be grounded upon the following three crucial presuppositions, each in distinction to the three moments of historicization evaluated above.

First, an authentic Adventist theological method should presuppose being responsibly tied to, or anchored in the supreme authority of Scripture in association with the writings of God's messenger, Ellen White, which are subject to the authority of the Scripture.<sup>34</sup> This critical relinking of Scripture to theological method reunites systematic theology to the Bible. It restores the vital connection which was severed by Schleiermacher's fatal turn to the subject and the consequent historicization of doctrine.

Second, Adventist theological method would do well to presuppose the basic permanence of the structures of reality, thus turning unequivocally from Darwin's momentous historicization of nature. This means that Adventist theological method needs to remain fundamentally Parmenidean in character and therefore ought to be fully and dynamically concordist with respect to the relation of science and religion. This position implies that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are "not merely to be taken *seriously*, but *historically*."<sup>35</sup> They are historical in nature and purpose.

Third, Adventist theological method should presuppose the fundamental ontological completeness of God as implied in the classic designation of God as the "I Am" recorded in Exodus 3:14, thereby distancing itself from aspects of Whiteheadian theological method which historicize God. In this fashion the historic identity of the Adventist message will not be compromised, but can emerge with greater depth and profundity to the glory of God.

### Conclusion

It is incumbent upon the Adventist community to join in renewed, open, frank, prayerful, Christian dialogue concerning both Adventist theological method and Adventist theological doctrine. Happily, recent theological and scientific research stemming from major academic communions other than the Adventist community indirectly indicate that principles of historic Adventist theological method need not be abandoned, but that the approach

represents a viable and convincing post-modern theological method.

For example, concerning the question of the Darwinian historicization of nature and the accompanying need for adopting a nonconcordist theological method toward the relation between science and religion, the recent works of Marjorie Grene,<sup>36</sup> and Alvin Plantinga,<sup>37</sup> a world class philosopher of religion, argue convincingly, contra Darwin, of the limited explanatory power of exclusive natural selection on the one hand, and of the continuing significance of special creation on the other. Plantinga says that the biological evidence points to the need for a scientific account of life that is not restricted by "methodological naturalism."<sup>38</sup> This is a welcome, strident voice calling for strong concordism in theological method in this age of endless theological differentiation and pluralism.

These kinds of developments indicate that the time is ripe for Adventist scholars as a whole and together to articulate clearly the basic principles of a positive, Scripture-grounded, unhistoricized theological method consistent with the Adventist message. This article is intended to be one orienting step in that direction.

### Endnotes

- 1 A. S. Peake, *The Bible: Its Origin, Its Significance, and Its Abiding Worth* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), p. 381.
- 2 Historicization represents the process of essential change over time. Thus, doctrine is relative meaning that the elements of doctrine may vary with temporal passage of time.
- 3 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, translated by John Oman (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 39.
- 4 Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox, 1960), p. 21.
- 5 Lecture by Brian Gerrish, Oct. 24, 1983.
- 6 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, edited by H. R. Mackintosh (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 123.
- 7 Schleiermacher, p. 76.
- 8 Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 201.
- 9 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), p. 71.
- 10 Schleiermacher, p. 88.
- 11 Brian Gerrish, lecture, October 25, 1983.
- 12 The author is informed in this section dealing with Schleiermacher by an insightful lecture presented by Brian Gerrish on October 24, 1983.
- 13 Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre* trans. James Duke and Francis Fiorenza Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), p. 64.
- 14 John M. McDermott, "Tensions in Lonergan's Theory of Conversion," *Gregorianum* 74:1 (1993): 137.

15 See Stephen Toulmin, "The Historicization of Natural Science: Its Implications for Theology," in *Paradigm Change in Theology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), p. 235.

16 William Morton Wheeler, "The Theoria Generationis," in *Defining Biology: Lectures from the 1890s*, edited by Jane Maienschein (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 198-199.

17 Wheeler, p. 199.

18 See John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 132-141.

19 Wheeler, p. 199.

20 Toulmin, p. 236.

21 Langdon Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 4.

22 Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch, and translated by Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1957), p. 3.

23 Bultmann, p. 4.

24 Bultmann, p. 5.

25 Howard J. Van Till, "Evolution: an Exchange," *First Things* 34 (June/July 1993): 38. The position of Van Till is illustrative of a leading sector of evangelical thinkers concerning the need for evangelical scholars to adopt theistic evolution. For a sampling of individuals sharing Van Till's orientation see the following works: J. I. Packer, "The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation: Creation" in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Interpretation 1988* (Nashville: Broadmann Press, 1988), 21-22; Clark Pinnock, "Climbing Out of a Swamp: The Evangelical Struggle to Understand the Creation Texts," *Interpretation* 43: (April 1989): 143-155; For a more liberal approach see, John Polkinghorne, "God's Action in the World," *Cross Currents*, (Fall 1991): 293-307.

26 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 521.

27 John Cobb, Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), p. 205.

28 See Bruce A. Ware, "An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47:2 (1985): 175-96.

29 See Huston Smith, "Has Process Theology Dismantled Classical Theism?" *Theology Digest* 35:4 (1988): 310ff.

30 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp. 137-138.

31 Grenz and Olson, p. 138.

32 Grenz and Olson, p. 143.

33 Bruce A. Ware, pp. 175-196. See particularly pages 191-192. See also the excellent discussion of this point in Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age*, pp. 142-143.

34 In this perspective the Scriptures constitute the first or supreme source of doctrinal authority. However, the writings of God's messenger, Ellen White, need always to be placed in association with the written Word of God, not as additional Scripture, but as contemporary messages revealed and inspired by the God of the Bible, and hence of doctrinal authority subject to the Bible ("[T]he spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets," 1 Cor 14:32). Thus, while the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* remains solidly valid in principle, the fact of the existence of and the place of the White corpus in relation to the *sola scriptura* principle needs to be officially acknowledged so that the *sola scriptura* concept is not interpreted in a fashion which rules out the doctrinal authority of the writings of Ellen White. This means, on the one hand, that Adventist theology has a secondary source of doctrinal authority outside the Bible, but that this source is subject to the authority of the Bible. Therefore, on the other hand, in light of the subjection of Ellen White to the Bible, Adventist theology has only one primary normative source of doctrinal authority, namely the Bible. However, both must be acknowledged together and in proper relationship in order

to remain true to the Adventist heritage, as troublesome as this may be to contemporary academic biblical and theological scholarship.

35 Thomas C. Vanden Heuvel, "Why Creation?" *Outlook* 40:6 (June 1990): 3.

36 Richard M. Burian and Marjorie Grene, "Editorial Introduction" *Synthese* 91:1-2 (1992): 6.

37 Alvin Plantinga, "When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21 (1991): 25ff.

37 Plantinga, p. 25.