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EPILOGUE

The Dialectic of Idolatry and Profanation: On Discerning the Spirit in Congregational Studies

Lois Malcolm

The contributors to this book have sought, in concert with the Spirit of God, to build up and empower congregations.¹ What knowledge base, skills, attitudes and beliefs, and behaviors do members of congregations need in order to faithfully and effectively enact their identity as those who, in the power of the Spirit, have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection (Rom. 6)? A key question in our deliberations has been how spiritual discernment might occur within the activity of theological reflection on practices that constitute the life of a congregation.² We have engaged a

1. On the burgeoning field of congregational studies, see Carl S. Dudley's introduction to "Giving Voice to Local Churches: New Congregational Studies," *The Christian Century* (Aug. 12-19, 1992), 742-46. See also James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986); Carl S. Dudley, Jackson W. Carroll, and James P. Wind, eds., *Carriers of Faith: Lessons from Congregational Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991); James Hopewell, *Congregations: Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). See, most recently, Matthew Guest, Karin Tusting, and Linda Woodhead, eds., *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004).

2. Practices are defined as those socially established patterns of human activity and meaning that mediate between the personal and subjective, on the one hand, and the corporate and objective, on the other. Oriented toward ends that inhere in the practices themselves, they may not necessarily have a product in addition to those internal ends. See David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville:

range of disciplines in this effort, including congregational studies, theological education, and practical theology, among others, in addition to the classical fields of biblical, historical, and systematic theology. Nonetheless, the focus of our attention has been on a single subject matter: the reality of God. As members of the Congregational Studies Research Team, we have approached our respective tasks in this project from the vantage point of our own academic disciplines and distinct vocations as theological educators. Yet we have all been focused on a singular task, that of spiritually discerning truth within the presence of the Spirit of God. Our theological reflection on congregations has found a shared locus in the activity of spiritual discernment.

Our reflections in these essays have been organized around Bernard Lonergan's eight functional specialties.³ We have moved from descriptions of congregational practices to initial understandings and assertions about them, to judgments about these assertions, and finally to analyses of the deeper dialectics uncovered in our conversations. This chapter focuses on one of these core dialectics. It reflects on three approaches relevant to congregational studies from the fields of theological education⁴ and practical

Westminster John Knox, 1992); see also Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995). This focus on "practice" can be contrasted with the attention given to "doctrine" in classical forms of Roman Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy and "experience" in modern liberal theologies. Compare Edward Farley's calls for a renewal of the classical concept of *habitus* in theological education, the ethos that cultivates the soul's dispositions and orientations in its knowledge of God, which he spells out in *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) and in his earlier *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). See also Francis Fiorenza's discussion of the turn to practical reason in "Theological and Religious Studies: The Contest of the Faculties," in Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 119-50. Craig Dykstra describes the centrality of practices to congregational studies in "Reconciling Practice," in Wheeler and Farley, *Shifting Boundaries*, 35-66. This turn to practice is reflected in a broader turn toward practical philosophy; see, e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); and Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

3. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1972).

4. On the relationship between congregational studies and theological education, see Joseph Hough, Jr., and Barbara G. Wheeler, eds., *Beyond Clericalism: The Congregation as a*

theology,⁵ as represented by Don Browning, David Kelsey, and Rebecca Chopp, with respect to the theological practices of two major twentieth-century theologians: Karl Barth and Karl Rahner.⁶ I use those two as exemplars to illustrate how theological reflection as a critical exercise might be rooted in basic Christian practices for understanding God truly. In particular, I focus on the Reformation act of preaching and the Ignatian practice of spiritual exercises. The fundamental dialectic I have uncovered in this analysis is that of the Reformed critique of idolatry (the treatment of what is profane as sacred) and the Roman Catholic critique of reductionism, or what could be called profanation (the treatment of what is sacred as profane).⁷ What I examine in this chapter is the relevance of this dialectic for discerning the presence and activity of God's Spirit within paradigmatic practices of Christian faith that lie at the heart of a congregation's moral discourse and action.

The Problem and Context

Let us begin with an analysis of three theological approaches to the study of congregations, approaches that correspond to broader movements in theological education and practical theology. Don Browning's *A Funda-*

Focus for Theological Education (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988). For related discussions on theological education, see Don Browning, David Polk, and Ian Evison, eds., *The Education of the Practical Theologian: Responses to Joseph Hough and John Cobb's "Christian Identity and Theological Education"* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Joseph Hough and John Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); Max Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); and Wheeler and Farley, *Shifting Boundaries*.

5. On the relationship between congregational studies and practical theology, see Don S. Browning, "Congregational Studies as Practical Theology," in Wind and Lewis, eds., *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, 192-224. See also Browning's influential *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). An exemplar of theological reflection with the congregation as a focus is Patrick Keifert's *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

6. See Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, chap. 10, "Dialectic." In the analysis of these positions, I have sought to follow in a general — if not a detailed fashion — Lonergan's description of the "structure" of a dialectic (see *Method*, 249ff.).

7. On the distinction between "idolatry" and "profanation," see Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

mental Practical Theology is our first exemplar.⁸ His intent is explicitly to relate the theological dimensions of congregational practices to their sociological, historical, psychological, and ethical dimensions.⁹ The distinctive thrust of his argument is to argue that theology as a whole should be conceived as a “fundamental or critical practical theology.” Informed by the turn to practical reason in hermeneutical and critical social theories, he intends to reverse traditional models of theological education that begin with theories and then apply them to practice. Instead, he contends that not only practical theology, but indeed all theology, needs to be conceived of as a fundamental, or critical, practical theology. Such a theology has four movements: descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic. And a fundamental practical theology such as this begins with the practical questions that emerge within congregational life as descriptive theology. It then handles these questions more generally and critically as historical and systematic theology, and finally allows these new insights to shed light on concrete situations within congregations themselves as strategic practical theology.

Browning notes the parallels between his position and David Tracy’s proposal for a revisionist theology that critically correlates Christian witness with other interpretations of culture and experience.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Browning contends that Tracy’s attempt to determine the transcendental truth status of such a correlation obscures the *practical* character of all theology. Hence, Browning confines his correlation approach of validity claims to more modest pragmatic, or hermeneutical, criteria. In a similar vein, he criticizes confessional theologies such as Barth’s for simply applying the theory of divine revelation to the practice of, say, giving sermons.

Our second exemplar is David Kelsey’s *To Understand God Truly*. In this book Kelsey seeks to provide a framework for assessing and reshaping the ethos and polity of theological schools.¹¹ His goal is to identify not only what unifies these schools, their construal of the *Christian thing*, but to do justice to the pluralism of ways this Christian thing is construed. His contention is that the diverse subject matters of theological schools are best understood with respect to their place and role in the actual practices

8. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

9. Note the five dimensions he includes in practical theology: the visional, obligational, tendency-needs (or anthropological), environmental-social, and rule-role.

10. See David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

11. David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*.

of existing congregations. In his attempt to identify the Christian thing, he rejects any essentialist construal that would limit it to an essence or structure that remains the same in all times and spaces. Therefore, Kelsey shies away from anything more substantive than a merely nominal depiction of Christian congregations. He defines them merely as that "group of persons that gathers together to enact publicly a much more broadly practiced worship of God in Jesus' name."¹² Such a nominal approach can best be described as "cultural-linguistic," because it defines its criterion for Christian identity primarily in terms of the linguistic practices of congregations.¹³

Our third exemplar is Rebecca Chopp's *Saving Work: Feminist Practices in Theological Education*, in which she reflects on feminist practices in theological education. In an analysis of the presence of women in theological education and the current state of feminist theological scholarship, she highlights the importance of feminist practices to theological education by describing three practices: (a) narrativity, how women compose or write new narratives for their lives; (b) ecclesiality, how women have attempted to reconstruct ecclesial practices; and (c) feminist theology, how women are reconstructing theology along feminist lines. She traces how such practices deconstruct patriarchal forms of theology and reconstruct Christian theology in a feminist vein. That reconstruction is informed by a range of feminist values, such as "particularity," "embodiment," "creativity," "mutuality," "friendship," "justice," and so on. Like Browning, Chopp is critical of traditional notions of divine transcendence. In her early work, she rejects Tracy's transcendental correlation approach in favor of what she calls a "praxis correlation."¹⁴ In *Saving Work* she rejects a traditional notion of divine transcendence, identifying it with a patriarchal emphasis on separation and detachment. Instead, she emphasizes the importance of connectedness and embodiment, not only in relationships among human beings, but also for speaking about God's relationship with human beings. She does speak of the importance of openness, but her emphasis is on openness to diversity and difference among human beings.

These three approaches differ in how they identify the central truth

12. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, 137.

13. Cf. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1992).

14. Rebecca Chopp, "Practical Theology and Liberation," in Lewis Mudge and James Poling, eds., *Formation and Reflection* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 120-38.

and meaning of Christian theology. For Kelsey, it is the practices performed in the name of Jesus that constitute the Christian identity of congregations and theological schools. For Browning, it is the critical correlation of the range of validity claims — metaphysical, normative, natural, social, and ecological — that emerge in the study of congregations. For Chopp, it is the feminist praxis that transforms patriarchal Christianity.

However, we can note three points of similarity among these positions. First, all three accept such modern notions of historical consciousness and a nonteleological view of the natural world. They are not advocating a return to premodern Christian orthodoxies. Second, all three advocate the turn to practical reasoning characteristic of much post-modern thought: they all recognize a deep interconnection between rationality and such factors as commitment, desire, and shared systems of belief and practice. Finally, all three are critical of traditional theological concepts of divine transcendence or philosophical forms of transcendental argumentation. This is the case whether they are conceived of in essentialist terms (Kelsey), in confessionalist or transcendental and metaphysical terms (Browning), or in the patriarchal terms of detachment and separation (Chopp).

Instead, Kelsey opts for a *nominal* criterion for truth: the name of Jesus. Browning and Chopp opt for *pragmatic* criteria: what enables human life to flourish. Such criteria enable these theologians to criticize some distortions in classical theology: (a) the reduction of what is distinctively Christian to a universal essence within human experience (Kelsey); (b) the reduction of concrete practices to theoretical abstractions (Browning); and (c) the reduction of Christianity to a patriarchal religion (Chopp). These criteria, in turn, enable them to criticize possible distortions of each other's positions. Kelsey might detect an essentialism in Browning; Browning might detect a narrow confessionalism in Kelsey; Chopp might detect patriarchalism in both Browning and Kelsey, and they, in turn, might detect a tendency by Chopp to reduce Christian faith to the concerns of a particular cause or movement.

The criticisms these positions offer each other can be situated within the long tradition of rational criticisms of distorted religion. These extend from Heraclitus's and Plato's critique of ancient Greek beliefs to Kant's and Hume's critiques of classical theism, to the later critiques of Christianity by Marx, Freud, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche. Nonetheless, in addition to these rational criticisms there have also been, throughout the history of both Juda-

ism and Christianity, distinctively *theological* forms of critique: these are the *prophetic* and the *mystical*.¹⁵ Prophetic critique is identified with the Old Testament prophets, some of the movements of monasticism, the Reformation, and evangelical radicalism. This kind of critique attacks the sin of *idolatry*, what I have identified above as the sin of treating as sacred or divine that which is profane or mundane. By contrast, the mystical critique within Christianity negates any form of *profanation*, what I have identified as the sin of treating as profane or mundane that which is sacred. This is found among patristic and medieval theologians. These two sins can be thought of as constituting the polarity of methods for understanding God truly.

In my analysis of Barth and Rahner,¹⁶ I will show how these two forms of critique mutually test each other's theological distortions — each other's possible sin.¹⁷ And yet, each form of critique is rooted in the same

15. See David Tracy's use of the contrast between the "mystical" and "prophetic" in *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Louvain: Peeters Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); see also his earlier contrast between "manifestation" and "proclamation" in *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1987). See also Paul Tillich's contrast between the prophetic and mystical in *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 81ff., 172ff.

16. For another study that examines how Barth and Rahner might contribute to a conception of "critical theology," see Gareth Jones, *Critical Theology: Questions of Truth and Method* (New York: Paragon House, 1995). His argument is compatible with the one I am making in this chapter. On the question of a "critical theology," note the following comment by Hugh T. Kerr in his essay "Time for a Critical Theology": "A critical theology, taking seriously the revelatory dimension of the gospel, could be our best safeguard against selling out completely to a 'religionless Christianity' which is no more distinguishable from secular humanism" (*Our Life in God's Light: Essays by Hugh T. Kerr*, ed. J. M. Mulder [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 60, quoted in Gareth Jones, *Critical Theology*, 6, n. 7). But note also Kerr's comment on "critical theology": "It is perhaps not unduly summary to say that this means systematic theology (a rarely practiced inquiry in the ancient English universities) is critical of its own ground and disturbing to the faithful (a rare phenomenon in confessional institutions). The task of the disturbing theologian in this sense is — or would be — to reflect, theoretically and critically, upon the first-order levels of more or less spontaneous religious (in this sense Christian) existence as they are found in symbolic, linguistic, and institutional forms" (in Kerr's review of Nicholas Lash's "Doing Theology on Dover Beach," *New Blackfriars* 60 [1979]: 237; quoted in Jones, *Critical Theology*, 6, n. 6).

17. This critique will be related to their respective notions of "hiddenness" (Barth) and "incomprehensibility" (Rahner). On the theological concept of "hiddenness," see B. A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion* (1973): 263-93. For Rahner's definition of "incomprehensibility," see "Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensible God," in David Tracy, ed., *Celebrating the Medieval Heritage: A*

theological criterion, which is the God known by Christians as the God revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

An Appropriation of Karl Barth's and Karl Rahner's Theologies

In the prolegomenon to his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth contends that the task of dogmatics is to test the proclamation of the church against the being of the church, the revealing and reconciling address of God in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ His theological method is rooted in the core act of Reformation piety, which is the preaching of the Word that sanctifies and justifies and that leads to obedience and self-denial. Barth's theology criticizes both a Protestant liberalism that locates the criterion for Christian theology in a more general ontology or anthropology and a Roman Catholicism that judges Christian theology in terms of the infallible teaching of the church. For Barth, theology's task is to test church proclamation against the criterion of the revelation of God. This revelation is given in a free divine act, rather than being the result of any human possibility or necessity. Nonetheless, this task is inherently difficult. In preaching, God's speech and action is only indirectly expressed in the two direct forms, proclamation and Scripture, forms that are in and of themselves human and not divine. Hence we encounter the challenge of dogmatics: how to discern God's speech and action when it is only found in a human form.

Colloquy on the Thought of Aquinas and Bonaventure, Journal of Religion Supplement (1978): S107-26. For an appropriation of Karl Barth's concept of hiddenness, see Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

18. Note Lonergan's perceptive comment: "It is to be observed that while for secular man of the twentieth century the most familiar differentiation of consciousness distinguishes and relates *theory* and *common sense*, still in the history of mankind both in the East and the Christian West the predominant differentiation of consciousness has set in opposition and in mutual enrichment the realms of *common sense* and of *transcendence*" (*Method in Theology*, 266; italics added). The thrust of my argument in this chapter is for the centrality of the latter differentiation of consciousness (between common sense and transcendence) to theological reflection without negating the importance of the former differentiation (between theory and common sense).

19. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vols. 1-4, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-77).

Barth understands God's hiddenness in revelation. Thus, God's speech and action is always, on the one hand, a law that judges all human pretensions and projections onto divinity; on the other hand, God's speech and action is expressed in concrete human forms. These include the humanity of Jesus, the preaching that gives witness to that humanity, the church in which that preaching occurs, and so forth. These forms tangibly articulate the gospel, God's revelation and salvation. Preaching repeats the Word of God in the here and now; it recollects and expects Jesus' death and resurrection. The sacramental reality at the heart of time is God's election of Jesus Christ, an election that culminates in his life, death, and resurrection. It is this life, death, and resurrection that, by the power of Jesus' resurrected Spirit, is repeated in the church's recollection and expectation of its eschatological and cosmic implications. These are always simultaneously past, present, and future. The theologian's task is patterned after that of an exegete and preacher committed to the hearing and doing of the Word. In this regard, Barth explicitly links his hermeneutical method with a Law/Gospel dialectic that actually speaks of God's judgment and mercy. The theological task must be an act of prayer and of gratitude, an act of response to a divine address, both *there and then* and *here and now*.

Rahner's theology, by contrast, is deeply informed by the Ignatian exercises and the act of discerning divine will and presence in the concrete and ordinary circumstances of life.²⁰ At the heart of his work is a depiction of the divine-human encounter as a dialogue in which human beings are understood to have an ecstatic or transcendent movement beyond strictly empirical experience. This orientation or openness toward the divine is radicalized by grace in such a way that humans do not experience God merely as the infinitely distant Other, but they also experience God as immediate and attainable. God can be apprehended, as in the beatific vision, in loving ecstasy and rapture. The task of theology entails depicting this fundamental encounter philosophically. It entails presenting the fundamental teachings or mysteries of the faith theologically so that they render an encounter with the divine and not merely a teaching of church tradition. Finally, it entails describing existentially the process whereby human

20. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); *Theological Investigations*, vols. 1-6 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961-69); vols. 7-10 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971-74); vols. 11-16 (New York: Seabury Press, 1974-79); vols. 17-23 (New York: Crossroad, 1981-92).

beings may surrender themselves unconditionally to the abiding presence of mystery in the concrete circumstances and decisions of their lives. But these tasks are fraught with a problematic similar to that of Barth's dogmatics. How can divine and infinite reality be said to be present within human forms that are always conditioned by finitude, realities such as space, time, history, and language?

Rahner understands God's incomprehensibility in self-communication to speak of the way God is experienced in one's abstraction from concrete particulars. Such abstraction, in turn, leads to the categorical experience of God in concrete experiences and thoughts, the finding of God in all things, and the mediated immediacy of God's presence in all reality. Explicit and more frequently implicit acts of prayer, for Rahner, enact the dynamism whereby God's offer of grace is accepted. We find this, for example, when decisions are made between good and evil, right and wrong in light of a conception of absolute truth or absolute good. For Rahner, the center of human and cosmic history is also Christological: that is, it is defined in terms of Jesus' incarnation, where the divine became human. All human actions and thoughts — and within them, all history — find their *telos*, their true meaning and purpose, from the incarnation. Rahner's mode of theological reflection is patterned after that of the person who leads others in contemplation and action, through an attitude of *indifference* toward all things so that one can then find God in all things. His very concept of the interpretation of doctrine is that it is such a person that leads one to an actual encounter with abiding mystery. The goal of interpretation is to lead one to see how the innumerable beliefs within Christianity actually have to do with the mystery of God's self-communication.

These two theologies offer criticisms of the potential distortions in each other's positions. Rahner's fear is that a position like Barth's fails to grasp what lies at the heart of God's incomprehensibility, which is the very inexhaustibility and limitlessness of God's own life. This is a mystery that cannot be reduced to the finite expressions of revelation or grace, even though these serve as the very grammar of divine self-expression. Rahner wants to emphasize the fact that it is always God, and therefore uncreated grace, who is present in the experience of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He stresses this even though this experience is always mediated by the finite person experiencing it. This leads him to criticize all forms of positivism, which can include a metaphysical *ontologism*, a biblical and dogmatic *extrinsicism*, or a scientific *positivism* that denies the sacred presence of

God in all finite reality. The key to Rahner's criticism lies in his critique of distortions concerning God's revelation or the experience of grace. He is concerned that God not be viewed as simply another agent, even if the largest agent, among human agents.

Barth's fear would be that Rahner fails to grasp the particular character of God's mystery as address: this is the election of Jesus Christ and his life, death, and resurrection, and the church's distinctive witness to it. For Barth, God's hiddenness even in this revelation entails that God cannot be circumscribed in ways that comprehend God's free act, as though this event could be circumscribed within human existence. He criticizes all forms of the analogy of being — whether of a liberal or Roman Catholic variety — that would reduce the free act of God's revelation to a category of being or subjectivity. The force of Barth's criticism lies in the critique of distortions that would treat the free act of God as yet another realization of a possibility within human existence.

What is at stake in the contrast between Barth and Rahner? Is it that Barth is a revelational positivist? Does he disallow human autonomy, the full knowledge and experience of God, or any possibility of a sacramental presence of God in the world or the church, and so on?²¹ Is it, in turn, that Rahner is an experiential expressivist? Does he not do justice to either the mystery of God or the concrete media that mediate the church's witness to the distinctive life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?²²

Where Barth and Rahner differ is over what each considers to be the central distortion of faith. For Barth, the central distortion is any false identification of some aspect of human experience — nature, reason, or history — with the knowledge and experience of God. This distortion presents the danger of being an idolatry that would sacralize some finite reality and absolutize it. By contrast, Rahner's idea of the central distortion

21. Barth has often been depicted as a "revelational positivist" who fails to deal adequately with human experience, both inside and outside the church, by subsuming all reality within the single act of God's election of Jesus Christ. For the first use of this phrase, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971), 28.

22. Rahner has been depicted as an "experiential expressivist" who fails to deal adequately with not only linguistic and cultural experience and natural constraints, but most importantly with what is distinctive to the Christian ecclesial experience and its witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the first use of this phrase, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*.

is not a false identification with the divine, but the negation of divine presence.²³ What he criticizes is not false spirituality but a false secularism. This is the case whether it takes an ecclesial or a humanist-scientific form, any form that fails to perceive God's sacred presence in all reality. For Rahner, the central theological distortion is the profanation that negates or refuses to recognize the presence of the sacred in all things, including one's own and others' agency and power.

A Critical Conversation with Congregational Studies

What relevance does this excursus on Barth and Rahner have for congregational studies? These two figures are relevant because they appropriate classical notions of hiddenness and incomprehensibility in ways that enact the presence and mystery of God in the actual practices of congregations. Such practices include listening to and appropriating sermons and Bible reading, and discerning God's will in specific choices on issues. Practical theology, along with its subdisciplines of theological education and congregational studies, has made important strides in rethinking how theological reflection might be done, given both modern and postmodern shifts in thinking. Nonetheless, the concern with what is distinctively theological in these fields of study could be intensified. Seeking to address this concern in this section, I set Barth and Rahner in critical conversation with Browning, Kelsey, and Chopp, the three exemplars of current thinking in theological education and practical theology.

Browning's central contribution to the study of congregations is his comprehensiveness. His fundamental practical theology has within its purview the whole range of goods, needs, and desires that constitute human and creaturely existence before God. He offers in this an antidote to a linguistic positivism that would reduce the totality of human existence to

23. Note the similarities between Karl Rahner's notion of sin and that of Lonergan: "Sinfulness similarly is distinct from moral evil; it is the privation of total loving; it is the radical dimension of lovelessness. That dimension can be hidden by sustained superficiality, by evading ultimate questions, by absorption in all that the world offers to challenge our resourcefulness, to relax our bodies, to distract our minds. But escape may not be permanent and then the absence of fulfillment reveals itself in unrest, the absence of joy in the pursuit of fun, the absence of peace in disgust — a depressive disgust with oneself or a manic, hostile, even violent disgust with mankind" (*Method in Theology*, 242-43).

specific cultural expressions, to particular forms of Christian identity. Nonetheless, Barth's notion of hiddenness brings to the fore a possible danger in this position. It might subordinate Christian theology to criteria derived from other disciplines and thereby commit the idolatry of establishing an external vantage point from which to view God's self-revelation. An antidote to such a distortion may be found in Rahner's understanding of the radical depth and irreducibility of divine incomprehensibility. The depth and irreducibility is, in fact, the condition for the possibility of all creaturely existence and all human knowing.

Kelsey's central contribution to congregational studies is his focus on the constitutive role the name of Jesus has for defining what is Christian in the practices of congregations. He offers an antidote to an experiential expressivism that would de-emphasize linguistic practices that constitute Christian congregations as Christian in favor of transcendental experiences of God. But Rahner's concept of incomprehensibility brings to the fore a possible distortion in Kelsey's position, the reducing of the Christian thing to a nominal — in Rahner's term, "extrinsicist" — conception of divine presence. As an antidote, we can recall Barth's emphasis that it is finally the resurrected Spirit of Jesus who is disclosed in the preaching and teaching of the church, the Spirit who is present precisely as the ascended Lord in that proclamation.

Chopp's argument for the importance of feminist practices in theological reflection is a definite critique of all forms of patriarchalism in Christian theology. But she also offers the corrective of emphasizing the centrality of concrete human experiences and movements that are taking place in our time. And yet, from a Barthian standpoint, the danger in her position is that it tends to blur the distinction between God's Word as an address from the Other and one's own particular experience of salvation or liberation. Once again, Rahner's concept of incomprehensibility provides a way of thinking about God as the abiding presence that is tangibly present within all human activity. This is true especially in human experiences of liberation, even though this presence cannot be reduced to any particular thought or action or experience of liberation.²⁴

24. Having outlined these insights from Barth and Rahner, I should also comment on how the emphases of our three contemporary thinkers offer correctives to their work. We have noted Kelsey's focus on cultural-linguistic practices, Browning's integration of a range of specific dimensions of human experience, and Chopp's focus on women's experi-

On the basis of this critical conversation, I offer three insights for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding God truly in congregations.²⁵ These insights revolve around the threefold task of how Christians might: (1) test the spirits in moral conversation and action; (2) reflect on that lived practice; and (3) understand how God is active in both activities.²⁶

The first task involves testing the spirits in conversation and action. Following our reading of Browning, this entails placing within the compass of theological reflection the totality of creaturely existence, including the metaphysical and religious, the social and linguistic, and the biological. It is especially important that theological reflection encompasses the whole of human existence in our highly complex, differentiated modern

ence. These three emphases indicate a strong trend in recent theology toward the concrete and particular in human experience. Barth and Rahner have been criticized for their lack of attention to concrete human history and experience: Barth for collapsing all creaturely existence (historical and natural) into the figure of Christ, and Rahner for collapsing all reality, including biblical history and public human history, into the creature's dynamism toward transcendence. See, e.g., Kendall Soulen's critique of Barth and Rahner in *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). Among Protestants influenced by Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg has placed a greater focus on human rationality, human history in general, and the proleptic expectation of the future. See, e.g., his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Eberhard Jüngel places greater focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus as the locus for naming God's identity; see Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World*. Finally, Jürgen Moltmann has emphasized both the cross and human creaturely freedom within history; see, e.g., *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. H. Wilson and John Bowden (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974). Within Roman Catholicism, Johann Baptist Metz has emphasized similar themes, giving greater attention to the future and to the suffering of Jesus and human beings in general within history; see *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980). Hans Urs von Balthasar, in turn, places greater emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus and the centrality of that event within the life of God; see *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983-88), and *Theodramatik* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1973-83).

25. I also develop some of these themes in another paper, entitled "Cultivating Wisdom in a Complex World," in L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, eds., *The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

26. My analysis follows the threefold pattern William Schweiker outlines in his essay "Beyond the Captivity of Theology: Toward a New Theology of Culture," presented at the American Academy of Religion, Nov. 2000: (1) socio-cultural *analysis*; (2) conceptual-linguistic *articulation*; and (3) religio-moral *attestation*. See also his *Power, Value and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

societies. In these societies we have multiple subsystems that are reflexive, that is, they act on and are affected by each other. In such societies, each social system, such as the law or the economy, must adapt itself as it interacts with information coming from other domains.²⁷ But how can one speak about this differentiation and still speak about God and thus the *whole* of one's existence? Following Luther and Calvin, the Reformation practice of preaching, with its reading, exegeting, and appropriating Scripture, cannot be divorced from the activity of enacting one's vocation. What is the meaning of "vocation" in classical Reformation theologies? It is the institutionally embodied expression of how individuals and groups might enact God's purposes in all of life, including the family, the government, and the church. In a similar vein, the Catholic practice of discerning the spirits presupposes a differentiated and hierarchical conception of human goods or ends. What does this conception of human goods or ends entail? It entails that human beings have a natural right to self-preservation even as they participate in a common social good.

Both sets of theological resources — that of a Reformation understanding of vocation or a Roman Catholic understanding of differentiated goods — presuppose God's presence and activity. In the former, the norms and purposes of life are rooted in patterns of interaction founded ultimately on God's fidelity to creation. In the latter, the natural ends of humans flourishing as individuals and in communities serve supernatural ends. These two legacies offer complex symbolic and conceptual resources for thinking about how we might order our lives as individuals, families, and congregations. More important, they offer resources for thinking about how Christian communities are indeed "ecumenical, worldly forces that can and may and must counterbalance [even] transnational, global agents."²⁸

The second task involves reflecting on particular lived practices. Following our reading of Kelsey, this entails naming within the concrete practices and face-to-face encounters of Christian communities precisely what

27. See John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 1992). See also William Schweiker, "Beyond the Captivity of Theology."

28. See William Schweiker's discussion of these two legacies in "Responsibility in the World of Mammon," in Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Paris, eds., *God and Globalization*, vol. 1 of *Religion and the Powers of the Common Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 105-39.

the God who raised Israel's Jesus from the dead would have us be and do (Rom. 12:1-2).²⁹ Precisely how is this God working all things together for good, not only in our lives but in the world as a whole, even when there may appear to be strong evidence to the contrary (Rom. 8:28)?

This is precisely why Christians exegete and appropriate Christian Scripture. They want to seek to discern God's will for their lives as they read and meditate on these texts. One can contrast the Reformation practice of preaching and exegeting the Word with the Roman Catholic practice of discerning the spirits. Nevertheless, these practices have a similar purpose. They both provide believers with a means for seeing and hearing how their lives are indeed affected by the historic and cosmic implications of Jesus' death and resurrection. Therefore, in these practices the task of interpreting the Bible is not simply that of repristinating the meanings of these ancient texts; nor is the task simply to find some singular essence that these texts were *really* intending.³⁰

Rather, the purpose of these practices is to read the biblical texts inductively in their full complexity, as actual genres and actual traditions in their original settings in life.³¹ Such an approach means reading these texts not only in their original settings in life but also in the range of ways they have been interpreted over time. Such a task will involve rethinking many of our highly abstract, commonsense notions of how God is active in the world in light of the rich and complex relationships among the pluralistic witnesses of Scripture.³² And such rethinking will mean taking seriously the distinct ways God's presence and activity is actually depicted in biblical descriptions of creation, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the ongoing presence of the Spirit.³³ The result of such rethinking is an even richer

29. See Robert Jenson's focus on the Trinity in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984).

30. See Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). See also Ronald Duty's essay entitled "Discerning the Will of God," in this volume.

31. Thus the historical and literary criticism of biblical texts has been an important part of the use of Scripture in this study of congregations. See, e.g., David Fredrickson's essay in this volume.

32. See Michael Welker, "Christian Theology: What Direction at the End of the Second Millennium?" in Miroslav Volf, Carmen Krieg, and Thomas Kucharz, eds., *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 73-88.

33. See Welker's reference to John Polkinghorne (*The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994], 4) in his essay

understanding of God's power and wisdom — and the creative freedom of creatures. It also entails correcting distorted ways of thinking and speaking about God and God's relationship to the world. This enables humans to appreciate and experience more fully the "real joy in God's vitality, genuine fear of God, and the vitality of human experiences of God."³⁴

The third task involves discerning how God is active and present in life. Following our reading of Chopp, this entails discerning and responding to what God is doing in concrete, particular circumstances. As I have noted above, the very complexity of highly differentiated modern societies entails reflexivity: different domains act on each other and affect each other reflexively. This means, for example, that the mass media, the economy, and what is identified as the spiritual are in a very real way profoundly linked. As human agents, we cannot divorce ourselves from this reflexivity.³⁵ Indeed, to function in such a complex society, we need to have a high level of self-reflexivity. This is required even though we may find ourselves thinking, feeling, and acting amid circumstances in which we do not feel like individuals who have much control over such matters.³⁶ But for Christians the purpose of such reflexivity cannot simply be about self-mastery or achieving one's purposes in the midst of a rapidly changing and sometimes chaotic world. The purpose is to discern how best to participate in God's justice and mercy in this world.

We have been baptized in Christ's death, and thus have "died to sin." This means that we, too, like Christ, might be "raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so that we might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Partly at issue here is dying to being self-centered in an individualistic sense, of seeing only our own ends and not the broader sweep of things. But also at issue is how we participate in systems, such as the economic,

"Christian Theology," 78. Following Polkinghorne's observation in the Gifford Lectures of 1993-94 that "many theologians are instinctively top-down thinkers," Welker suggests an inductive "bottom-up" reading of Scripture.

34. Welker, "Christian Theology," 75.

35. Note the ongoing relevance of Lonergan's perceptive analysis of reflexivity; see esp. his discussion of Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind* (e.g., in *Method in Theology*, 260ff.). For an insightful discussion of "spiritual reflexivity" from a sociological perspective, see Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

36. See, e.g., Peter Seneger, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

political, and cultural systems in which we find ourselves. We use these systems to pursue particular interests, many of which are incompatible with God's reign of truth and justice, as is evident in Romans 8:38-39: here is a list of things we might fear would separate us from God's love.³⁷ But in the final analysis, it is not critique and death that we are about — but life. The purpose of testing our biases and distortions is for us to perceive the rich density of God's goodness in the very webs of interconnectedness we find ourselves in, whether on an interpersonal or institutional level.³⁸

In the words of François Roustang, a modern Jesuit spiritual writer: "To discern God's will, our first care must be to let things and beings assume their own value and their own weight, to thrust aside previous impressions and to welcome as a living reality this world in which God is at work."³⁹ This requires spiritual discernment, what St. Paul calls the "wisdom of God": it is allowing the Spirit, who searches all things, to reveal to us the "deep things of God," the "mind of Christ."⁴⁰ Such intelligence is not measured by scholastic aptitude tests; rather, it lives out of the truth of the future. This future is entailed in the promise that all things will indeed work together for good and that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8). But such discernment also respects the past: it recognizes how the present is constituted by previous situations, events, relationships, acts, and thoughts. Of course, this past derives its value from the future that God is preparing for us. Nonetheless, the future can also be a dangerous myth if it does not accept the past, and if it does not fully recognize where and what things really are in the present.

Thus the spiritual cannot be divorced from the cognitive in congregational studies. Spiritual or theological wisdom (*sapientia*) must embrace the other disciplines in the study of congregations (*scientia*), such as history, the social sciences, education, and so on.⁴¹ We must not aban-

37. Welker makes this point in "Christian Theology," 84-86.

38. Lonergan's very helpful discussion of biases and distortions in theological reflection should not be overlooked. See *Method in Theology*, esp. chap. 10 on "Dialectic" and chap. 11 on "Foundations." Iris Murdoch is also helpful on this; see, e.g., *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992).

39. François Roustang, S.J., *Growth in the Spirit*, trans. Kathleen Pond (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), 141.

40. On the "mind of Christ" in Phil. 2, see David Frederickson's essay in this volume.

41. Again, Lonergan is helpful on the relationship between the "sapiential" and the "cognitive," or, to use his categories, intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. "I would

don empirical description and rational analysis, for they have a role in our fully understanding the entanglements of our lives: to whom we commit ourselves, what we buy, how we vote, how we spend our time — the basic attitudes, beliefs, and values we allow to influence our perception of the world. These are precisely the places where we experience the beauty and goodness of God's creation, the reality of sin and tragedy, and the healing and forgiving power of Jesus' resurrection and the new creation it entails.

The specific form such discernment takes will vary. The complexity of the biblical texts themselves, and their rich diversity of genres, is testimony to that variety. Note the range of these texts, from the wisdom that accounts for the best in nature and human intelligence (Prov. 8) to the folly of the cross that confounds the wise and the debaters of the age (1 Cor. 1:20-25). In this chapter I have focused on the dialectic that these two classical forms of wisdom represent. We have seen these in Rahner's depiction of grace and Barth's depiction of the gospel. We have also noted the two distortions, or forms of sin, that they wish to reject. But this analysis has not simply focused on critique. The point of the dialectic we have analyzed is to assist congregations in discerning how God is at work *in*, *with*, and *under* the reality of our lives. The point is to enable us to discern when and how God's goodness is being replaced by some idolatrous effort to be God, and when and how to enact God's justice and mercy in the often messy complexity of life.⁴²

use [the notion of 'sublation'] in Karl Rahner's sense rather than Hegel's to mean that what sublates goes beyond what is sublated, introduces something new and distinct, puts everything on a new basis, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context" (*Method in Theology*, 241).

42. Cf. Michael Welker's comment about "realistic theology" in *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), xi: "Many theologies grounded in human experiences and forms of experience need to take as their points of departure both actual demonstrations of God's power within creation and people's search for God in the realm of that which is creaturely. This is true whether the orientation of such theologies be empirical, pietistic, moral, epistemological-philosophical, or otherwise. A realistic theology mediates this need of theologies grounded in human experience with the concern of classical, Reformation, and dialectical theologies 'from above' to take God's divinity seriously and not to obstruct enjoyment of the fullness and glory of God."

Conclusion

In summary, throughout these discussions of congregations we have been arguing that God can only be understood indirectly. God is always both hidden and revealed in the church's proclamation (cf. Barth); God's mystery and incomprehensibility remain even as we come to know and love God more deeply (cf. Rahner). Nonetheless, as Christians we affirm that God has revealed who God is in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. By the power of the Spirit, we have been called and sent to tangibly attend, assert, decide, and act on this within the totality of our lives. But that means that we must risk thinking and speaking about God, and thus we risk the sins of either idolatry or profanation.

Within Protestantism, the main fear has been of the danger of idolatry. If anything, modern culture has sought to base its public life on what is universal, objective, and abstract, and not on what is sectarian. Indeed, one could argue that the Enlightenment critique of particular religions could be seen as a secularized version of this Protestant critique.⁴³ The Congregational Study Research Team has presupposed that the finite is capable of bearing the infinite: this means that the worldly and mundane can indeed embody God's presence. What I have argued for here is an appropriate balance of this polarity. Of course, in addition to the danger of idolatry, there is also the danger of profanation. Therefore, what I have offered by way of a comparison of Barth and Rahner is an analysis of precisely this dialectic and how it might function in the discerning of God's presence in actual congregational practices.

43. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), would be the paradigmatic exemplar of this.