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JAMES MCCLENDON'S THEOLOGICAL METHOD: A POSTFOUNDATIONALIST
ALTERNATIVE FOR THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS OVER THEOLOGICAL
LANGUAGE

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LUIS MARCOS TAPIA RUBIO

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ABSTRACT

Liberal, fundamentalist, and conservative theologies are three different theological trends that have tried to respond to the modern epistemological crisis by following a foundationalist epistemological framework, proposing different foundations for the construction of theological knowledge. However, the alternative to overcome theology's epistemological crisis seems to be found in a rejection of foundationalism altogether. In this respect, postliberal theology is one contemporary theological trend that has consciously rejected foundationalism. However, one of the major critiques of postliberal theology is that its non-foundationalism reduces every theological claim to an intrasystemic profession of faith, affirming a relativistic non-foundationalism with a limited notion of truth. In this sense, the main critique of postliberal theology is that it is still in need of a theory of reference since such a theory seems to be the only alternative to determine whether any theological claim is true and under what circumstances it is justified to believe that claim. Without a solution to this predicament, it seems that the only possible response to the current epistemological crisis in theology is to hold an outdated foundationalist theology. Against this option, there have been different responses from the postliberal trench. However, these responses have not been sufficient to address this problem of reference. In this respect, there is a prevalent need in theology to offer not just particular responses to this matter but a comprehensive one. That is, to show how a postliberal theological method can confirm its theological claims without the need to succumb to the logic of a foundationalist epistemology but also without holding a relativist non-foundationalism. In this regard, the theology of James Wm. McClendon Jr. is a valuable resource.

Although not sufficiently explored and usually reduce to a mere "Anabaptist" or "baptist" theology, McClendon's theological work laid out a postliberal theological method that has no

theory of reference but nonetheless still grants an important place for reference. For McClendon, the confirmation of a theological claim does not need a rational and extra-confessional “foundation.” In that respect, his theological method is anti-foundationalist, offering a confirmation for theological claims throughout a description of the internal structures and logic of the Christian convictions. However, following John L. Austin, McClendon also holds that these internal structures and logics are always connected with the rest of the world. For him, every theological claim presents an interconnection between language structure and persons, and the reality beyond that includes both. In that sense, McClendon’s method grants a place for reference in theological claims because, for him, language, including religious language, not only connects the members of a Christian community with each other but it also connects the particular Christian community with other communities, including non-religious communities. Following Austin, McClendon shows that Christian convictions do not float free from the world of fact and meaning, and truth cannot be reduced to a mere communal belief but must be understood holistically, that is, considering the affective, representative, and primary conditions of language. In this regard, McClendon’s method is not only holistic, holding and integrating the correspondence theory of truth, the coherence theory of truth, and the pragmatic theory of truth, but it is also postfoundationalist, since it goes beyond relativism, showing that it is possible to construct a postliberal theology that embraces a truly holistic notion of truth. Hence, by introducing a distinctive form of postfoundationalist theology, McClendon offers an alternative for the confirmation of theological claims that overcomes the problem of reference in postliberal theology.

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Introduction

Since modernity, theology has been struggling with the question of how to confirm or justify its claims due to the arrival of scientific criteria for knowledge and truth. In order to hold its place as a valid discipline among others, theology was forced to follow the modern quest for knowledge that rested on certitude and sure foundations. That is, for the confirmation of its claims, theology assumed the epistemological foundationalism present in other disciplines. Currently, due to the postmodern epistemological crisis, it is no longer possible to subscribe to any of the comprehensive and homogeneous epistemological theories in any discipline, especially after the fall of the modern positivistic unitary ideal for science. However, the question about how theological claims can be confirmed is still relevant, especially since most of contemporary theology still holds a modern foundationalism that keeps trying to find a secure base for its theological endeavor. Hence, one of the main theological questions still lingering in our time is whether and to what extent foundationalism is the only option to confirm theological claims. According to Nancey Murphy, foundationalism is a modern philosophical theory that states that claims can be justified only when the chain of justifications stops in a foundational belief, that is, a belief that cannot be called into question, avoiding in this way a circular infinite regress in the justification process.¹ For J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, foundationalism is an epistemological view that states that “*mediately* justified beliefs required epistemic support for the validity in *immediately* justified beliefs, or alternative... the view that systems of knowledge, in content or method, always require first principles [emphasis in original].”² Van Huyssteen

¹ Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 12–13.

² J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 62.

adds that the epistemic features of these foundational beliefs are “self-evidence, incorrigibility, indubitability, being evident to the senses, and thus being self-authenticating and properly basic (i.e., foundational) for our wider networks of belief.”³

Liberal, fundamentalist, and conservative theologies are three different theological trends that have tried to respond to the modern epistemological crisis by following a foundationalist epistemological framework, proposing different foundations for the construction of theological knowledge. For these trends, theological claims are warranted or justified by appealing to basic items of knowledge that are considered self-evident or beyond doubt, which range from data provided by divine revelation to universal essences given by religious experiences.⁴ Murphy states that while liberal theology has established religious experience as the foundation for theology, for fundamentalist and conservative theologies, the Christian beliefs rooted in the Scripture are the only appropriate basic items of knowledge.⁵ In this case, the difference between a fundamentalist theological perspective and a conservative one is that they vary in their accounts of the means of construction from Scripture to theology. For fundamentalist theologians, there seems to be no mediation between what the Bible says and Christian theological claims. While for conservatives, hermeneutical mediations are embedded in the theological task. Another difference between them is that the former affirm the Bible’s complete inerrancy, while the latter question this fundamentalist position and prefers to hold other views about the Scripture, such as a verbal inspiration of the Bible, for example. Nonetheless, fundamentalist and conservative theologians alike assume a direction of reasoning from

³ Van Huyssteen, 62.

⁴ Van Huyssteen, 62.

⁵ Nancey Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity: Philosophical Perspectives on Science, Religion, and Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 89.

scriptural foundations to higher levels of doctrine and theology, never from doctrine to the truth or meaning of the texts.⁶ Murphy also states that, contrary to fundamentalist and conservative theologies, liberal theology holds that Scripture cannot be the foundation for theology because it is impossible to defend the traditional idea of the Bible as a result of divine inspiration, even less the inerrancy of the biblical text. For liberal theologians, the Christian Scriptures are a progressive record of the religious experiences of Jews and Christians. Hence, the basic items that work as the foundation for theological knowledge are universal religious experiences.⁷ From this liberal perspective, theological knowledge must be based on common human experiences available to all people, regardless of culture and religious training, and it must be immediate and independent of interpretation. That is why its foundation, religious experience, is not necessarily Christian in character.⁸

Currently, the modern foundationalism of fundamentalist, conservative, and liberal theologies is not an option. The alternative to overcome theology's epistemological crisis seems to be a rejection of foundationalism altogether, as the only option to confirm theological claims. This rejection of a foundationalist epistemology is one of the many signs of the major cultural transition of our time from modernity to postmodernity. As Paul D. Murray states, the foundationalist epistemological assumptions have been undermined as a wide range of thinkers have pointed to the illusory quality of any hope for a pure, guaranteed access to reality and the impossibility of grounding human knowledge in a context-neutral fashion. Postmodern thinkers assume that all human knowing is embedded in and variously influenced by historical location, socio-political context, psychological factors, and shared patterns of behavior and linguistic

⁶ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 17.

⁷ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 24.

⁸ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 27.

practices. Hence, human knowing is not only shaped in accordance with a characteristically human cognitive apparatus but it is contingent upon the particular embedded practices and ideologically slanted perspectives of each and every knower.⁹ In this respect, postliberal theology is one contemporary theological movement that has assumed these postmodern ideas and has consciously rejected foundationalism. According to James Fodor, as a term of art, postliberal theology surfaced after the appearance of George Lindbeck's book *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* in 1984. However, for Fodor, the unity and cohesiveness postliberal theology possess are achieved more by way of family resemblances than by a single feature or agenda. In that sense, postliberal theology is hardly a well-defined theological school.¹⁰ Fodor characterizes postliberal theology in several ways, stating that it deploys narrative as a key category and that it promotes a distinctively Christian form of intratextuality, which means the attempt to redescribe reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating the Scriptures into extrascriptural categories.¹¹ Because of this, postliberal theology also emphasizes the peculiar grammar of Christian faith, concentrating on its scriptural logic and the regulative role of doctrine.¹² According to Fodor's recount, postliberal theology

⁹ Paul D. Murray, *Reason Truth and Theology in a Pragmatist Perspective* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2004), 5.

¹⁰ James Fodor, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 229–30. George Lindbeck and Hans Frei are the two seminal figures of this distinctive kind of theological engagement. Other exponents—and this is a representative not an exhaustive list—include Paul Holmer, David Kelsey, Stanley Hauerwas, Ronald Thiemann, James Buckley, Joseph DiNoia, Garrett Green, George Hunsinger, William Werpehowski, Bruce Marshall, William Placher, Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Serene Jones, Joseph Mangina, Eugene Rogers, Kathryn Tanner, and James Wm. McClendon Jr.. If more recent developments and permutations are included, the list of postliberal theologians may be extended to include, on the one hand, figures like John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward and, on the other, Peter Ochs, David Ford, and Daniel Hardy. However, not all of the above would feel entirely comfortable accepting the appellation "postliberal" as a self-description, nor would they necessarily see themselves being classified together, let alone advancing a common cause.

¹¹ Fodor, 233–34.

¹² Fodor, 230.

“adopts a non-foundational epistemological posture, committing itself to offer pragmatically superior and theologically fructifying conceptual redescriptions of the Christian faith, instead of attempting to ground those claims on purportedly universal principles or structures that can be accessed in a ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ (i.e., framework-independent) manner.”¹³ In that sense, postliberal theology emphasizes the rational coherence and credibility of the Christian faith, which exhibits itself more in terms of good performance and competent execution than by conformity to independently formulated criteria.¹⁴

Due to its rejection of a foundationalist epistemology, one of the major critiques pending on postliberal theology is that its non-foundationalism reduces every theological claim to an intrasystemic profession of faith, denying in this way any valid notion of truth, ultimately promoting religious relativism. As Ronald T. Michener says, “postliberal theologians are accused of reducing truth to that which accords faithfulness in life and church community to the narrative of scripture. This being the case, some believe this is sacrificing the entire notion of truth.”¹⁵ As a response to this critique, postliberal theologians reply that it is not necessary to understand the rejection of a foundationalist epistemology as a complete denial of truth. They state that postliberal theology only denies the primacy of the correspondence theory of truth that its critics assume due to their foundationalist assumptions.¹⁶ A correspondence theory of truth holds that the concept of truth should be mainly understood as propositions that refer to facts that are

¹³ Fodor, 231.

¹⁴ Fodor, 231.

¹⁵ Ronald T. Michener, *Postliberal Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 96.

¹⁶ I will present this reply from postliberal theologians in chapter 1.

objective and absolute and, therefore, propositions that correspond to reality.¹⁷ Postliberal theologians, on the contrary, have a different notion of the relationship between language and world.¹⁸ They align themselves with postmodern perspectives that state that there is no basis for the assumption that a proposition could perfectly “match up” with the way the world really is. Therefore, truth cannot be a matter of simple correspondence.¹⁹ However, postliberals are still continually criticized for this disregard of the correspondence theory of truth and embrace instead two other theories of truth, the coherence theory and the pragmatic theory.²⁰ However, as Michener says, although postliberal theologians do not understand truth as conservative theologians do, they are constantly claiming that they are not denying the notion of truth, nor that they are reducing it to a mere intra-tradition notion, but rather that they are affirming an understanding of truth that moves beyond the reduction of truth to empirical correspondence.²¹ Hence, the reason for the disagreement between postliberal theologians and their critics regarding truth has to do with their different understanding of language, and specifically, their different understanding of the connection between reference and meaning. Murphy mentions that the representative or referential perspective on language holds that words refer to or represent ideas, and ideas, in turn, stand for things in the world. Sentences represent the connections the mind makes between these ideas. In that sense, for language to have meaning, there must be an

¹⁷ James Emery White, *What Is Truth?: A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F.H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 5.

¹⁸ I will present the postliberal notion of language in chapter 1.

¹⁹ James K. Dew Jr. and Paul M. Gould, *Philosophy: A Christian Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 16–17.

²⁰ According to White, a coherence theory of truth holds that a system of thought is true if it does not contradict itself, while a pragmatic theory of truth holds that all truth is measure by its functionality. White, *What Is Truth?*, 5.

²¹ Michener, *Postliberal Theology*, 97–98.

“outside” referent, a “thing” in the world, as Murphy says.²² Against this intrinsic connection between meaning and reference that is present in all foundationalist theologies, postliberal theologians deny that meaning and reference are necessarily connected, following the view of ordinary language philosophy. According to John Allan Knight, ordinary language philosophy has emphasized that “all that is required for a sentence to have meaning is that there be roughly specifiable circumstances under which it is legitimately assertable and that the language game which involves its assertion plays a role in our lives.”²³ In other words, for postliberal theologians, the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence is connected with its use in ordinary life. Therefore, no theory of reference is needed to determine the meaning of theological terms and sentences.²⁴

Due to its different understanding of language, the critics consider that postliberal theology is affirming a relativistic non-foundationalism with a limited notion of truth. That is, a notion of truth that does not go beyond a coherence theory of truth and a pragmatic theory of truth. Hence, the main critique pending on postliberal theology is that it is still in need of a theory of reference, since such a theory seems to be the only alternative to determine whether any theological claim is true and under what circumstances it is justified to believe that claim. Knight states that without a theory of reference, it is impossible for postliberal theology to meet the demand for confirmation of its theological claims.²⁵ In this respect, it seems that postliberal theology indeed has a problem of reference, a problem that gives place to relativistic non-foundationalism. Therefore, without a solution to this predicament, it seems that the only

²² Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 10–11.

²³ John Allan Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism: The Great Divide in Twentieth-Century Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

²⁴ Knight, 12.

²⁵ Knight, 14–15.

possible response to the current epistemological crisis in theology is to hold an outdated foundationalist theology. Against this option, there have been different responses from the postliberal trench. However, these responses have not been sufficient to address this problem of reference.²⁶ In this respect, there is a prevalent need in theology to offer not just particular responses to this matter but a comprehensive one. That is, to show how a postliberal theological method can confirm its theological claims without the need to succumb to the logic of a foundationalist epistemology but also without holding a relativist non-foundationalism. In this regard, the theology of James Wm. McClendon Jr. is a valuable resource.

Although not sufficiently explored and usually reduce to a mere “Anabaptist” or “baptist” theology, McClendon’s theological work laid out a postliberal theological method that has no theory of reference but nonetheless still grants an important place for reference.²⁷ For McClendon, the confirmation of a theological claim does not need a rational and extra-confessional “foundation.” In that respect, his theological method seems to be anti-foundationalist, offering a confirmation of its theological claims through the description of the internal structures and logic of Christian convictions. However, following John L. Austin, McClendon holds that these internal structures and logics are always connected with the rest of the world. For him, every theological claim presents an interconnection between language structure and persons, and the reality beyond that is inclusive of both. In that sense, McClendon’s method grants a place for reference in theological claims because, for him, language, including religious language, not only connects the members of a Christian community with each other but it also connects the particular Christian community with other communities, including non-

²⁶ I will present this “insufficiency” in chapter 1.

²⁷ McClendon prefers the term ‘baptist’ with a lower-case ‘b.’ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Ethics (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 19.

religious communities. Following Austin, McClendon shows that Christian convictions do not float free from the world of fact and meaning, and truth cannot be reduced to a mere communal belief but must be understood holistically, that is, considering the affective, representative, and primary conditions of language. In this regard, McClendon's method is not only holistic, holding and integrating the correspondence theory of truth, the coherence theory of truth, and the pragmatic theory of truth, but it is also postfoundationalist.²⁸ As Brian C. Macallan says, it is not necessary to understand postliberal non- or anti-foundationalism as a complete relativistic position. A non-foundationalism or anti-foundationalism could also be understood as a postfoundationalist epistemological perspective.²⁹ As Murray states, a postfoundationalist epistemology acknowledges both the contextually rooted nature of all discourse and the force of the truth claims that such discourses nevertheless exert, contrary to a non-foundationalism that rejects even the aspiration for truth.³⁰ Therefore, postfoundationalism is a position that desires to steer a middle ground between an extreme relativistic form of non-foundationalism, which ultimately could digress into a religious anti-realist position, and the naive realism of foundationalism.³¹ In this respect, McClendon's theological method is postfoundationalist

²⁸ I will present these claims regarding McClendon's theology and method in detail in chapter 2 and 3.

²⁹ Brian C. Macallan, *Postfoundationalist Reflections in Practical Theology: A Framework for a Discipline in Flux* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 13–14.

³⁰ Murray, *Reason Truth and Theology in a Pragmatist Perspective*, 6.

³¹ According to Peter Byrne, realism versus anti-realism in the interpretation of a mode of discourse relates to whether it is possible to take the statements in that mode of discourse to be true or false of the appropriate mind-independent entities. For him, realism/anti-realism stances on the intent of theistic discourse relate to whether the apparently referential, propositional character of theistic statements is to be taken seriously. Peter Byrne, "Theology and Religious Language," in *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2012), 588–89. Therefore, as Jeffrey Hensley states, realists believe that reality exists independent of their minds or cognitive activity. The linguistic representations of the world in the form of beliefs, experiences and theories do not preclude the fact that the world "out there" is totally independent of these representations. For a realist position, facts about reality—including the metaphysical nature of God—are "true," independent of human representations or conceptions of these phenomena. On the other hand, antirealists deny that reality exists independently of human minds. All reality is dependent upon human conceptual schemes or systems of representations. Consequently, reality is not mind independent, as the realist maintains, but its existence is dependent upon human cognition. Jeffrey Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealist? Reexamining the

because it goes beyond relativism, showing that it is possible to construct a Christian theology that embraces a truly holistic notion of truth and a religious realist perspective.³²

The present work aims to show how McClendon's method does not offer a merely denominational postliberal theology but a theology that develops a truly postfoundationalist theology, a theology that defuses religious relativism and offers an alternative for the epistemological crisis over theological language. In order to do this, in the first chapter I will present a critique regarding the need for a theory of reference in postliberal theology. This chapter will also show how postliberal theologians have responded to this critique and how these responses remain inadequate. The second chapter will introduce McClendon's theology, presenting an overview of McClendon's method and theological work. McClendon's major work, his three volumes *Systematic Theology—Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness*—are built on the main theological perspectives of his previous works, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* and *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*. Hence, this second chapter will present all of these works. Finally, taking the elements presented in the second chapter, in the third and last chapter I will show how McClendon's theological method responds to the problem of reference, providing a postfoundationalist alternative to the epistemological crises over theological language. My goal is to provide an examination of McClendon's theology, highlighting its originality to respond to one of the main critiques pending on postliberal theology—that is, the problem of reference—and to show how his theological method provides an alternative to overcome theology's epistemological crisis without

Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 70.

³² I will show McClendon's postfoundationalism in chapter 3.

succumbing to the representative or referential perspective on language that is present in foundationalist theories, but also without falling into a relativistic non-foundationalism.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Reference in Postliberal Theology

According to some of its critics, postliberal theology denies any valid notion of truth and promotes religious relativism by reducing every theological claim to an intrasystemic profession of faith. The major reason for this negative view is that postliberalism seems to reject the importance of reference to determine meaning and truth in theological language. This first chapter aims to present this pending critique on postliberal theology by describing Hans Frei's and George Lindbeck's problem of reference, highlighting some of their responses to it and also showing how they remain inadequate to offer a complete rebuttal regarding this problem. In this respect, John Allan Knight has developed an extensive description of the problem of reference in postliberal theology. For him, a theory of reference is imperative in order to determine whether any theological claim is true and also to determine under what circumstances it is justified to believe that claim. Since postliberal theology not only goes against the descriptivist theory of language but it also denies the need for any theory of reference, Knight considers that it is impossible for postliberals to meet the demand for confirmation of its theological claims.³³ Due to the importance of Knight's critique, this chapter will follow his description of the problem of reference in Frei's and Lindbeck's postliberal theologies.³⁴ Hence, in the first section, I will present Knight's summary of Frei's and Lindbeck's rejection of a descriptivist theory of theological language, while the second section will focus on a description of the problem of reference in postliberal theology, showing how Knight's critique concurs with many of the

³³ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 14–15.

³⁴ Regarding Knight's work, Jason Springs says, 'Knight's book is bold and ambitious. Its argumentative strategy is forcefully and brilliantly engineered. ... I want to emphasize at the outset that I consider it an excellent book in many regards.' Jason A Springs, "A Wittgenstein for Postliberal Theologians," *Modern Theology* 32, no. 4 (October 2016): 622, f.n. 3.

critiques regarding this problem coming from different theologians. Finally, in the third section, I will identify some of the postliberal responses to this critique pending on postliberal theology, indicating the reason why these responses remain inadequate to offer a complete refutation on this problem of reference.

I

Frei's and Lindbeck's Rejection of the Descriptivist Understanding of Theological Language

According to Knight, it is the rejection of the descriptivist theory of language in liberal theology, the one that originates the problem of reference in postliberal theology, which is why this first section will follow Knight's interpretation of Frei's and Lindbeck's work in order to clarify the reasons for their rejection of the descriptivist theory of language. Frei rejects the "wrong turn" of liberal theology regarding how language acquires meaning, while Lindbeck follows Frei but from a different perspective.

Knight states that in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, Frei analyzes and critiques the inextricable connection that liberalism established between meaning and reference.³⁵ That is, the notion of meaning-as-reference. Frei, contrary to this liberal notion, holds that the meaning of a biblical text must be distinguished from its reference. For him, the meaning of the biblical texts must be understood as the depictions that the text contains. Hence, meaning is located in the text itself and should not be understood referentially.³⁶ For Frei, says Knight, "the genre of biblical narratives was similar to that of realistic novels. Just as the sentences and paragraphs in realistic novels have meaning

³⁵ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, Revised Edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

³⁶ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 155–56.

despite their failure to refer to some ‘real’ (or extratextual) event, so the meaning of biblical narratives should not be thought of as being ‘located’ in any extratextual events to which the narratives referred.”³⁷ Knight underscores that in Frei’s view, behind the liberal connection between meaning and reference there is an “apologetic impulse to justify or defend the claims of Christian theology to Western intellectuals that were increasingly skeptical of these claims.”³⁸ For this apologetic task, liberal theologians assumed a referential theory of meaning, which states that “not only words, but sentences and indeed the stories themselves, have meaning only insofar as they provide a descriptive sense that can ‘refer’ or point to entities or states of affairs outside the text itself.”³⁹ This apologetic effort was a mistake for Frei because, according to Knight, it ignores the “‘tyrannical’ nature of the biblical stories, that is, the fact that Scripture wants to produce a universal history of significance.”⁴⁰ Regarding this, Knight states that Frei’s problem with liberalism was that “the meaning of biblical texts thus became constituted by their reference to independently verifiable (or falsifiable) fact claims.”⁴¹ Hence, the primary question for liberals was whether the biblical texts can actually depict the “real” world, which, in Frei’s view, detaches the meaning of the biblical narrative from the specific story that sets it forth.⁴²

According to Knight, Frei’s problem with the liberal notion of meaning in connection to reference—meaning-as-reference—is present in the two strands of interpretation regarding Scripture’s meaning in the German liberalism of his time. One strand spoke of meaning as the historical or ostensive referent, while the other strand emphasized “ideal objects” as candidates

³⁷ Knight, 156.

³⁸ Knight, 162.

³⁹ Knight, 163.

⁴⁰ Knight, 162–63.

⁴¹ Knight, 167.

⁴² Knight, 164.

for the meaning-giving referents of texts. That is, the referents for the narrative could be concepts, possible states of affairs, etc.⁴³ Knight highlights that, for Frei, these two strands reversed the direction of interpretation and solidified an understanding of meaning-as-reference that eliminated the possibility of a truly narrative rendering of the Scripture.⁴⁴ The problem that Frei had with both strands was that, for them, meaning was located outside the texts themselves, and hence, the conditions and criteria of the meaning of the biblical texts were given by independently established epistemological principles, giving priority to epistemology over ontology in theological method. In this way, says Knight, the debate about the meaning of biblical texts turned into an epistemological debate about reference.⁴⁵ In Frei's view, says Knight, "when the meaning of the biblical texts are held to consist in their reference to some extratextual reality, and when the conditions and criteria of that meaning are given in advance by a prior theory of understanding, it follows...that the reader must already have some independent understanding of the reference of the texts if she is to understand their meaning."⁴⁶ Here again, the "tyrannical" nature of the biblical narratives is overturned, subordinating the narratives to epistemological needs in order to defend the Christian claims in a modern Western setting.⁴⁷

In Knight's view, Frei's position on meaning actually shifted with time. In Frei's early works, meaning is constituted by the narrative, but in his later works, meaning is constituted by community usage. Because of this shift, Knight considers that in his later works Frei moved closer to Lindbeck's position, giving priority to the community in establishing the meaning of

⁴³ Knight, 169–71.

⁴⁴ Knight, 171–72.

⁴⁵ Knight, 180–81.

⁴⁶ Knight, 181.

⁴⁷ Knight, 181.

biblical texts.⁴⁸ In *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Lindbeck contrasts his cultural-linguistic theory of religion and doctrine against what he calls the cognitive-propositionalist theory and the experiential-expressivist one.⁴⁹ In the cognitive-propositionalist theory, doctrines function as propositional claims about states of affairs, and religions are sets of such truth-claims. In the experiential-expressivist theory, doctrines are representations of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations, and religion represents them in their symbolic systems and narratives. Therefore, in this latter theory, doctrines are judged by how adequately they represent a basic existential attitude or orientation, which is connected to the common or universal religious experience. Hence, doctrines do refer to something, but not to some “objective” reality. Against these two theories, Lindbeck argues for a cultural-linguistic approach, using language and grammar as descriptive analogies.⁵⁰ Knight says that for Lindbeck, “religions are like languages...and doctrines are like grammar. Doctrines are not propositions describing states of affairs, but rules about how to make intelligible propositions”.⁵¹

According to Knight, from Lindbeck’s perspective, the best comparative criterion to assess religion is categorical adequacy. This means that every religion can specify its truth-claims according to its own system of cultural-linguistic categories. Therefore, it is only possible to judge a religious truth-claim from within the linguistic system of beliefs of the particular religion that states that claim.⁵² In that sense, “to say that a religion is categorially false means

⁴⁸ Knight, 199–201.

⁴⁹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 30-42.

⁵⁰ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 201–2.

⁵¹ Knight, 202.

⁵² Knight, 203.

either that its claims cannot be conceptualized or that the concepts needed to express its claims cannot be articulated in an understandable way. Thus to say that a religion is categorially false would entail not that it is propositionally or expressively true or false, but meaningless.”⁵³

Lindbeck understands doctrines as communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are essential to the identity of a specific religion, whether that religious community has official doctrines or not.⁵⁴ Because of this, doctrines for Lindbeck are second-order claims about how to formulate first-order claims, and only these first-order claims are claims about states of affairs. For Knight, “the advantage of this view of doctrine, in Lindbeck’s view, is that it does not reify either experiences or truth-claims. These can change through time, while only the grammar (doctrine) remains constant.”⁵⁵

Knight states that, in Lindbeck’s view, dogmatics must focus on specifying the meaning of the Christian faith intratextually. In this sense, the theological task would be to reinscribe extrasystematic events within the system of a particular community. That is why Lindbeck does not expect that the Christian story should explicate the “true” meaning of these extrasystematic events. Every extrasystematic event is, in fact, meaningless until it is absorbed into the narrative of a particular community. Because of this, Knight says that Lindbeck, like Frei, insists that experience is linguistically constituted from the beginning, and the language that constitutes the Christian religious experience must be the language of the Christian story. One cannot change Christianity’s language without changing Christianity. Hence, for Lindbeck, the first-order

⁵³ Knight, 203.

⁵⁴ Knight, 203.

⁵⁵ Knight, 204.

religious claims derive their meaning from their use in the community's religious life, and this use is regulated by the grammatical rules or doctrines.⁵⁶

As I mentioned above, Knight believes that Frei eventually shifted from the position of his early work, where meaning is constituted by the narrative, to a position where meaning is constituted by community usage. In this respect, Frei's later position is closer to Lindbeck's. Frei deemed that the literal sense of the Scripture must prevail over its narrative form because of its place in the Christian community.⁵⁷ This shift is evident in a series of lectures and essays that Frei offered from 1982 until 1987. These essays were later collected under the title *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* and finally published in 1993.⁵⁸ Knight highlights that in those essays Frei discusses two different forms of theology. On the one hand, theology is viewed as a reflection on religious phenomena or ideas grounded in a foundational philosophical theory. On the other hand, theology is understood as a description of how the church uses its theological language. According to Knight, Frei does not agree with the notion of theology as a reflection on religious phenomena because there the meaning of the religious experiences is given by the transcendental truth conditions of a given philosophical theory.⁵⁹ The second notion of theology—theology as the description of the church's language—is a better option for Frei because the church itself is language forming. That is, meaning and understanding for Frei “are not defined in advance by reference to transcendently established truth conditions, but arise out of their agreed use in the community. They are better seen as dependent on their context.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Knight, 205.

⁵⁷ Knight, 205.

⁵⁸ Hans W. Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵⁹ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 206.

⁶⁰ Knight, 206.

Knight says that this implies that, for Frei, it is not possible to talk about the meaning of biblical narratives, or about the meaning of theological discourse, in a context-neutral or language-independent way in isolation from the Christian community. For Frei, it is possible to use philosophical constructs or concepts, but they must be subordinated to Christian self-description. In this regard, the biblical narratives are to be understood in their literal sense because that is the way the church has used these narratives in its form of life. That is, in order to understand a biblical story, it is necessary to follow the use of the biblical narratives in the Christian form of life.⁶¹ Therefore, the literal sense of the Scripture for Frei is not related to a referential understanding of the biblical text, but with the judgment of the Christian community. Knight clarifies Frei's notion here by saying that Frei argues that

in the modern period, the literal sense of the biblical texts came to be their referentially understood meaning (the events to which they purported to refer). Yet it is not the referential understanding of their meaning that constituted this sense as their literal sense, but the judgment of the community that their extralinguistic reference was their authoritative teaching. Thus what makes a particular sense of a biblical text the 'literal' sense is nothing other than the community's judgment (or the presupposition of certain of its actions) that this particular sense is authoritative. And a particular sense will be authoritative insofar as it enables the church to live out its mission.⁶²

This is important for Knight because Frei's understanding of the literal sense gives to the Christian community the role of ultimate arbiter of the meaning of any and all biblical texts.⁶³

Knight underscores that Frei quotes Lindbeck to say that meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguished from it. In that sense, says Knight, for Frei as for Lindbeck, meaning is derivable from the use of the community.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Knight, 206–7.

⁶² Knight, 208.

⁶³ Knight, 209.

⁶⁴ Knight, 211; Frei, *Theology and Narrative*, 147; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

Frei's last project, *Types of Christian Theology*, was edited by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher and published posthumously in 1992.⁶⁵ According to Knight, Frei's typology in that last work is structured around the relations between the two different forms of theology that Frei mentioned in *Theology and Narrative*. In the first form of theology, philosophy provides the criteria of meaning, certainty, coherence, and truth, while in the second form theology is limited to be a method of Christian self-description. Frei classifies theologies and theologians in relation to these two forms of theology, and, by following these criteria, he articulates five general types of theology, judging their adequacy in relation to his idea of the literal sense of Scripture.⁶⁶ According to Knight, "by setting up the criteria for individuation and assessment in this way, Frei gives an important methodological role to the linguistic meaning of theological claims, and discussions of linguistic meaning figure prominently in Frei's descriptions of the five types."⁶⁷

Knight states that the first two types of theology that Frei describes focus on the first form of theology, where philosophy provides the criteria of meaning, privileging external descriptions of Christianity, while the third type reflects an ambiguity regarding the relationship between internal Christian self-description and external description. In this third type, theology is an academic discipline, but at the same time, it is a self-descriptive discipline within the church.⁶⁸ According to Knight, in Frei's fourth type of theology, exemplified by Barth's work, Christian self-description takes priority over the academic enterprise and philosophical analysis. This priority means that theology is not dependent on universal philosophical concepts neither

⁶⁵ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁶⁶ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 211–12.

⁶⁷ Knight, 212.

⁶⁸ Knight, 212–16.

for its assertions to have meaning nor for its criteria of truth or rational assent. Hence, the rules with which theology must comply are derived from the communal Christian context and subject to theology itself rather than to universal or context-invariant principles. Here, theology is a systematic procedure that has its own rules, usually implicit, but also developed only as the context of theology itself develops.⁶⁹ For Frei, says Knight, this Christian self-description is independent of every external endeavor to describe Christianity as a specific religion. In that sense, it is independent of every historical account. If theology is done according to this fourth type, all criteria of meaning and truth must arise within its specific theological context, and, therefore, cannot be understood as “universal,” either by academic theology or from “outside” theology.⁷⁰

Knight underscores that one of Frei’s main concerns in *Types of Christian Theology* is whether and how this fourth type of theology can justify itself without becoming a matter of mere assertion, but also without resorting to universal criteria of meaning or rational assessment. Regarding this, Knight states that Frei’s approach for the justification of this fourth type of theology is a specific feature that distinguishes it from the first three types. That is, the fact that in this fourth type of theological criteria of meaning is not descriptivist or referential because Christianity has its own language, distinct from every other form of discourse. In that sense, criteria of meaningfulness arise intracontextually, due to the self-involving nature of Christian theological discourse.⁷¹ Knight highlights the following quote from *Types of Christian Theology* in order to explain this idea:

To learn, for example, to explicate Christian scripture about faith, hope, and love, is not only to master these concepts, but to be able to apply them pertinently and propose the

⁶⁹ Knight, 216–18.

⁷⁰ Knight, 216–18.

⁷¹ Knight, 218–19.

same to others. On the one hand, justification by faith is a doctrine that functions as a rule in, let us say, orthodox Christian discourse. Not only does it function as a rule but it looks as though it were asserting something about how God deals with human beings, and to that extent is a statement that holds true regardless of the attitude of the person or persons articulating it. On the other hand, it is equally true that the assertion works as a concept that is meaningless apart from the appropriate attitude of gratitude, and obedience subsequent to gratitude, which is the condition for understanding it—indeed, the manner in which it is understood.⁷²

Regarding this quote, Knight says that “as Christian self-description, theological statements must be practiced as well as uttered as a necessary condition for their acquiring meaning. Furthermore, such practice is also a necessary condition of understanding such statements.”⁷³ According to Knight, theological statements for Frei have a use/praxis-oriented aspect as well as a normative aspect, and both are necessary for ascribing meaning to them. The praxis-oriented aspect of theological statements does not deny the normative aspect, which is necessary in order to apply Christian discourse to other linguistic contexts. However, these two aspects cannot be systematically correlated either. In this sense, in this fourth type, says Knight, although Christian discourse overlaps other linguistic contexts, Christian theological statements are not reducible to any other language nor to a more universal language, which is why the rules for the use of Christian language are never absolute, but always subject to modification by the actual use of the Christian community.⁷⁴

The fifth type of theology according to Frei’s typology is an enclosed theology. That is, an intra-language theology that focuses on self-description, a theology that does not need any connection with other “languages.” Knight says that in this type, there is no need for any metaphysical philosophical scheme. For Frei, this fifth type is exemplified in the work of D. Z.

⁷² Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 42; Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 219.

⁷³ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 219.

⁷⁴ Knight, 219.

Phillips.⁷⁵ Knight states that the difference between this fifth type of theology compared to the fourth type is the different terms of the criteria for meaning and truth of theological claims. In this fifth type, the meaning of many words and concepts is different between religious and non-religious contexts. Hence, the criteria for deciding which sentences are meaningful in religious contexts, and what the actual meaning of these sentences is, are completely internal to religious discourse. That is, religious language only gets its meaning from the way it is used in the internal and communal religious discourse.⁷⁶ Knight also underscores that the contrast between the fourth type and the fifth type in Frei's typology is that the former holds that the distinction between the use of language or criteria within Christian discourse and the use of language or criteria outside this Christian discourse is not absolute, while in the latter, the inside/outside distinction is absolute, theology here is strictly an intra-communal endeavor.⁷⁷ In this sense, regarding the fourth type, Knight says that "theological and religious contexts or forms of life can and do overlap with other forms of life, allowing for a limited *ad hoc* borrowing of criteria of meaning or rational belief. The possibility of *ad hoc* borrowing, in turn, implies that there may be universal criteria of meaning or truth though we do not have access to the universality of such criteria."⁷⁸ As Knight clarifies, in the fifth type of theology, this *ad hoc* borrowing of criteria of meaning is not possible because a "language" different from the theological one, such as the philosophical one, belongs to a different form of life, and because of this, it functions with different criteria of meaning.⁷⁹ However, for Knight, Frei does not consider that Phillips is

⁷⁵ Knight, 220.

⁷⁶ Knight, 220.

⁷⁷ Knight, 220–21.

⁷⁸ Knight, 221.

⁷⁹ Knight, 221.

completely rejecting an overlap between theological language and philosophical language, at least not in principle. Rejecting any kind of overlap would make theology subordinate to philosophy because philosophy would be the one dictating this prescriptive principle. In this sense, Knight states that it is not difficult to understand why Frei struggles to differentiate Phillips's theology from Barth's. If both agree that, at least in principle, theology and philosophy could overlap, it would be possible to say that philosophy can actually be connected with theology—against Phillips—and not necessarily as a subordinate “language”—against Barth. However, for Knight, the crucial differentiating feature between the fourth type and the fifth type of theology in Frei is that even with an overlap between theology and other languages, the task or goal of theology is understood differently. In the fifth type, the goal of theology is far more limited than in the fourth type, because theology is understood as religious discourse, therefore, it does not propound universal theories about human life, the world, or God, but it only tries to establish the meaning of the language of religious communities. Because of this, this fifth type of theology considers that the religious concepts function in a regulatory manner, for example, to shape religious consciousness, and do not intend to describe reality. Hence, this fifth type of theology excludes philosophy not because it does not overlap with theology, but because its goal differs from the regulatory goal of theology.⁸⁰

According to Knight, it is not that in Frei's *Types of Christian Theology* religion and theology are unrelated to other forms of life and discourses, but the main issue for Frei is that they do not depend on other forms of life and discourses to justify its claims nor to specify criteria of justification. Hence, there is a difference between the nature of religious claims and other kinds of claims. However, a refusal to acknowledge the fact that there is some sort of

⁸⁰ Knight, 221–22.

overlap between theology and other discourses can prevent any significant redescription of traditional Christian claims.⁸¹ On Knight's interpretation, "Frei is arguing that the overlap between religious and other forms of discourse is what allows for the development of religious traditions. Without such overlap, our only options when faced with traditional claims are arbitrary departure from them, simple repetition of them, or silence."⁸² Regarding this, Knight highlights that, for Frei, "in matters of doctrinal statement, pure self-confinement to Christian self-description means no self-description."⁸³ Phillips's confinement of theology to pure Christian self-description would be, according to Frei, a function of the dominance of a philosophical theory.⁸⁴

In Knight's interpretation of Frei's and Lindbeck's major works, it has been possible to perceive how liberal theology adheres to a descriptivist understanding of language and why Frei and Lindbeck reject this descriptivist theory. In this respect, Knight clarifies that in a descriptivist understanding of language each meaningful sentence describes a corresponding possible fact, and this possible fact is true or false depending on its actuality. That is, a sentence acquires meaning due to its truth conditions, making it necessary to go to the "actual" facts in order to understand what that sentence means. Therefore, if the meaning of a sentence is acquired descriptively, meaning is closely connected to its reference.⁸⁵ It is because of this descriptivist theory of language that liberal theology establishes a link between meaning and reference, to the point that talking about meaning implies talking about the referent. That is,

⁸¹ Knight, 221–22.

⁸² Knight, 222.

⁸³ Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 55; Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 223.

⁸⁴ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 222–23.

⁸⁵ Knight, 228–29.

meaning-as-reference. In that sense, liberal theology holds to a referential view of language and to a referential view of meaning, where words, sentences, and stories in a text have meaning because they describe entities or states of affairs outside the text itself. That is, because they refer to something extra-linguistic. As I highlighted by following Knight, Frei and Lindbeck reject this descriptivist theory in theological language because it implies that it could be possible to know the meaning of the biblical text only by pointing to its referent, and to do that it is necessary for the reader to have an independent understanding of the reference that is previous and outside the biblical text itself. On the contrary, as I have shown, meaning for Frei and Lindbeck is constituted by the community usage of the biblical narrative, and that meaning cannot be defined in advance by pointing out to established truth conditions or referents outside the biblical text.

II

The Problem of Reference in Frei and Lindbeck

By following Knight's interpretation of Frei's and Lindbeck's work, I have shown that both Frei and Lindbeck consider that one of the mistakes of liberal theology is the assumption of a descriptivist theory of language. According to Knight, Frei and Lindbeck deem that the descriptivist theory of language leads theology to a subservient position, where philosophical concepts and schemes set the methodological rules of hermeneutics and limit the content of theological self-description. As an alternative to this descriptivist theory, they hold a different understanding of linguistic meaning. That is, a view of meaning-as-use in a form of life.⁸⁶ In Knight's words:

When Frei argues for the literal reading of biblical texts as given by the Christian community's rule for reading them, he is arguing that their meaning is given by their use

⁸⁶ Knight, 241.

in the Christian community's form of life. And doctrines, on Lindbeck's view, are (part of) the Christian community's rules for reading them (and for other uses of Christian religious language). To put it in language Frei used earlier in his career, the meaning of the texts is "located" in the community practices of reading.⁸⁷

According to Knight, Frei considers that the Christian understanding of the world must be unique because it must depend only on the Christian form of life. It is possible that the meaning of concepts such as "reason," "truth," or "meaning" within the Christian form of life could be connected to the way these concepts are used in other forms of life. However, ultimately, the meaning of these concepts—and others—within the Christian form of life must be constituted by the way they are used within the Christian community.⁸⁸ In that sense, for Frei and Lindbeck, the meaning of the biblical narratives must be determined independently of the reference. It is the Christian narrative, within the Christian community, the only one that grants meaning to the Christian theological language.⁸⁹ Hence, Frei's and Lindbeck's postliberal theologies entail a different understanding of meaning that functions as an alternative to a descriptivist theory of language, which, for Knight, is closely related to Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning-as-use, derived from his antitheoretical orientation to philosophy.⁹⁰ According to Knight, this connection between postliberalism and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is also noted by sympathetic interpreters of Frei and Lindbeck, such as William Placher, Mark Ellingson, and Kathryn Tanner.⁹¹

In Knight's view, it is this Wittgensteinian understanding of meaning-as-use that originates a major problem in postliberal theology, that is, the problem of reference. By

⁸⁷ Knight, 241.

⁸⁸ Knight, 241–42.

⁸⁹ Knight, 242.

⁹⁰ Knight, 243.

⁹¹ Knight, 243–44.

following Wittgenstein, says Knight, postliberal theology assumes that the Christian form of life is the only one that determinates the meaning of the biblical narratives. Therefore, it dismisses the descriptivist theory of language regarding the biblical texts and rejects the role of reference in the determination of their meaning without providing any other theory of language. For Knight, the main predicament of postliberal theology is that, by removing the need for any theory of reference, it seems to eliminate the truth of the biblical narratives.⁹² In this respect, Knight rejects this postliberal meaning-as-use alternative to the descriptivist theory of language because it separates meaning from reference altogether without providing another theory of language.

Knight is not the only one who alludes to this problem of reference in postliberal theology. For Mark I. Wallace, postliberal theology originates many questions regarding the extra-linguistic reference and truth.⁹³ In respect to the intratextual approach of postliberalism, he asks:

[W]hat is the status of such a claim, and specifically, how is it related to the church's self-understanding that its intrabiblical life has a purchase on extrabiblical reality? What is the truth status of theological language according to the Yale school? ... what truth claims, if any, do such faith-specific statements make? Can we ever say that such claims are statements about the world "out there" beyond the church's "in here" appropriation of its founding persons and events? Is theological discourse something more than a *witness* that instantiates certain grammatical rules (Lindbeck; Holmer), something more than literary *interpretation* of biblical stories (Frei)? Does not theology also make *assertions* that refer *extra nos* to realities that exist independently of this grammar and these stories?⁹⁴

Here, Wallace seems to question postliberal theology's commitment not only to hold truth claims but also to hold a realist theological perspective. Due to its intratextual approach, it is hard for Wallace to understand how postliberal theology could hold that religious language points to a

⁹² Knight, 253.

⁹³ Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 104–10.

⁹⁴ Wallace, 104.

reality beyond the Christian framework, beyond its conceptual schemes or systems of representations. Therefore, for him, it seems that postliberal theology assumes an anti-realist perspective when it comes to religious language, a position that holds that religious claims are about the perceived reality only within a particular religious community or subculture, within its own religious language, concepts, and social forms. For Wallace, the postliberal perspective assumes that the truth of theological discourse inheres in how the discourse is used, not in the realities to which it refers. In this respect, theological statements are true not because they correspond to reality but because they constitute a “form of life” that coheres with the world of the biblical texts.⁹⁵ For postliberals, Wallace says, “to ask the nagging question of the realist, ‘Does the church’s grammar correspond to the way things really are?’ betrays a context-independent definition of truth foreign to how religious statements actually function. They do not refer to objective reality, but instead render the church’s contextual vision of the world internally coherent.”⁹⁶ On the contrary, Wallace assumes they can and do make ontological truth-claims independent of believers’ moral dispositions and level of religious commitment, and, for him, this has been the church’s self-understanding regarding its language in the past. Due to this problem of reference, Wallace considers that postliberal theology sets aside the ability to make first-order assertions about God and the world and second-order clarifications of these assertions in the form of doctrines.⁹⁷

As I have shown, the specific critique pending on postliberal theology regarding the problem of reference—that is, the loss of truth and a realist perspective on religious language by discarding reference—is also underscored by many conservative theologians. In his work,

⁹⁵ Wallace, 104.

⁹⁶ Wallace, 105.

⁹⁷ Wallace, 105.

Knight introduces two of these conservative critiques addressed to Frei's work, from Carl Henry and Francis Watson. In addition to these critiques, other conservative theologians have focused on Lindbeck's work. In this respect, I will mention below Miroslav Volf's and Alister McGrath's critique of Lindbeck, together with Cardinal Avery Dulles's critique of Lindbeck's work. I deem that it is important to present Dulles's critique not only because he represents a Catholic conservative approach but also because Lindbeck replies directly to Dulles, as I will show in the next section.

As Knight mentions, Henry and Watson consider that by setting aside the question of reference, Frei fails to make an argument for the historical factuality of the resurrection, and this is a serious theological omission. In Henry's view, Frei's theology is incapable of conveying accurate historical data without the inclusion of a specific perspective on reference. In this regard, postliberal theology's "epistemological hiatus" on the narratives' historical reference offers an inadequate ground for assessing or defending theological claims.⁹⁸ Likewise, Watson reaches a similar conclusion. For him, Frei's focus on the difficulties of meaning-as-reference leaves no means to address any historical question to the Gospel accounts, despite Frei's acknowledgment that Christian theology must affirm that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection really occurred. In Watson's view, Frei has no conceptuality available for making the assertion about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection plausible.⁹⁹

Like Henry and Watson, McGrath and Volf consider that postliberal theology discards truth by dispensing an external referent and reducing theological claims to an intrasystemic

⁹⁸ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 253–54; Carl F. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8, no. 1 (1987): 3–19.

⁹⁹ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 254–55; Francis Watson, *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 224.

consistency, although they focus on Lindbeck's work.¹⁰⁰ According to McGrath, Lindbeck claims that language always functions within a cultural and linguistic world and, hence, it does not necessarily refer to anything. In that sense, says McGrath, the question of how a Christian theological "idiom" relates to the external world is considered to be improper for Lindbeck.¹⁰¹ Also, regarding Lindbeck's notion of doctrine, McGrath says that the language of the Christian community for Lindbeck seems to be a self-perpetuating dialect that entails the abandonment of any talk about God as an independent reality. In that way, any suggestion that it is possible to make truth claims in an ontological rather than in an intrasystemic sense is unacceptable.¹⁰² In this respect, McGrath concludes that Lindbeck reduces the concept of truth to internal consistency. Hence, the problem with Lindbeck's theology for evangelicals, says McGrath, is that

Christianity is not simply about interpreting the narrated identity of Jesus or giving a coherent account of the grammar of faith. It is about recognizing the truth of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is about the perception of the truth of the gospel, and thereby the perception of the need for Christian theology to give as reliable an account as possible of its identity and significance.¹⁰³

That is, for evangelicals, there must be an extrasystemic referent to function as both the foundation and criterion of the Christian language game. In the same sense, truth, according to McGrath, must be understood to be located not just within the language of Christianity but outside the Christian sphere as well.¹⁰⁴ Volf's argument against Lindbeck is in the same vein as

¹⁰⁰ Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 16.

¹⁰¹ Alister E. McGrath, "An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 36.

¹⁰² McGrath, 36.

¹⁰³ McGrath, 38.

¹⁰⁴ McGrath, 39.

McGrath's. According to Volf, postliberal theology does not concede the necessary importance to truth because it does not emphasize truth's propositional dimension. Volf states that in Lindbeck's theology, a religious utterance acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence only insofar as it is a performance. Because of this, ontologically true claims seem to be propositionally false for Lindbeck when they do not produce or are not accompanied by a corresponding performance. This connection between proposition and performance in Lindbeck's theology is very problematic for Volf because he considers that propositionality is built into the very fabric of religious belief. For him, religion constructs meaning under two conditions: when it affirms something and when that affirmation has an appearance of objectivity. That is to say, in religion, an acceptable meaning cannot be seen as constructed out of arbitrary signs but only out of true propositions. In that sense, Volf asserts that propositions are essential to the functions of religion and theology must be propositional at its core, which, according to him, puts him at odds with Lindbeck.¹⁰⁵

From a Catholic perspective, Cardinal Avery Dulles also criticizes Lindbeck's work based on its reference problem because the postliberal proposal seems to understand the truth of Christianity as predominantly intrasystemic. In a review of Lindbeck's work *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, Dulles says,

I do not see the cultural-linguistic approach as antithetical to the propositional. If we are to worship, speak, and behave as though the Son of God were himself God (as Lindbeck rightly affirms), is it not because the Son really and ontologically is God, whether anyone believes it or not? By inserting the *homoousion* in the creed, the Council of Nicaea was indeed laying down a linguistic stipulation; but more importantly, it was declaring an objective truth.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Miroslav Volf, "Theology, Meaning and Power: A Conversation with George Lindbeck on Theology & the Nature of Christian Difference," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 58–60.

¹⁰⁶ Avery Dulles, "Postmodern Ecumenism," *First Things*, October 2003, Number 136, 61.

To this Dulles adds that the depiction of language as a set of convenient symbols used according to the conventional rules of a language game is deceptive. He considers that we cannot intelligently debate about linguistic rules unless we are conjointly aware of the subject matter to which the words refer. In that sense, for Dulles, to substitute grammatical debates for debates about the things meant is to obfuscate the necessary connection between meaningful language and reality.¹⁰⁷ He concludes,

while rightly rejecting univocal literalism, Lindbeck seriously undermines, if he does not dismiss, the propositional truth of dogma. Like Lindbeck ... I wish to overcome the limitations of the liberal or critical program without falling into modernist subjectivism. But Lindbeck's own program concedes too much to postmodernist relativism. I would hope that he could amend his cultural-linguistic theory to give greater attention to the capacity of religious language to disclose the reality of God.¹⁰⁸

As I have shown in this section, Frei's and Lindbeck's problem with a descriptivist theory of language is that it points toward another form of life and another understanding of the world, not the Christian one. A descriptivist perspective deems that the meaning of the biblical text is located in the connection between the biblical language and its "outside" referent. Hence, this referent is not part of the Christian narrative. As an alternative, postliberal theology assumes an intratextual approach, where the meaning of the biblical text is located within the Christian narrative in connection with the Christian community that lives within this narrative. That is, postliberal theology proposes a literal reading of biblical texts as given by the Christian community's rule for reading them, focusing on meaning-as-use as an alternative to the descriptivist theory of language.

In sum, Knight and other theologians, such as Henry, Watson, McGrath, Volf, and Dulles, are not willing to leave behind a descriptivist theory of language. For these critics, the postliberal

¹⁰⁷ Dulles, 61.

¹⁰⁸ Dulles, 61.

notion of meaning-as-use is not good enough to convey theological truth and to hold a realist perspective. For them, the Christian religion requires the propositional truth of an ontological correspondence in order to base its theological claims, which is only possible by holding a descriptivist theory of language. For these critics, reference is essential not only to hold the truth of the biblical text and Christian theological claims but also to go against anti-realist positions that promote religious relativism. In this respect, these critics still hold a foundationalist epistemology, where the basic items of knowledge are given by the correspondence between the biblical text and its referents, hence the problem of reference in postliberalism.

III

Postliberal Responses to the Problem of Reference

Frei and Lindbeck have tried to respond to the problem of reference in postliberal theology by showing that the rejection of a descriptivist theory of language does not imply discarding reference altogether. However, after these responses, some critics and supporters of postliberal theology still consider that without a specific theory of language the problem of reference remains. Therefore, the question about the possibility of granting a place for reference without holding a theory of language is still open.

In an oral reply to Henry's critique, Frei offered a direct response to the problem of reference in postliberal theology. This reply was later published and reprinted in Frei's *Theology and Narrative* with the title "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal.'"¹⁰⁹ In his response, Frei states that it is possible to establish the meaning of a biblical text

¹⁰⁹ Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

independently of history but not independently of a referent. For Frei, the gospel narrative itself is connected to the person identified as Jesus to the point that the narrative and the person are both the referent of the biblical text.¹¹⁰ In that sense, the biblical text refers in a double sense, it refers to facts and history but also to the textual referent. However, Frei also claims that the textual referent is sufficient to provide meaning because it points toward the same element that the historical referent, the Word of God. The reason for this sufficiency is that referencing is always language-bounded, and this is clearer when the referents are non-empirical entities.¹¹¹ In that respect, Frei says, “we start from the text: that is the language pattern, the meaning-and-reference pattern to which we are bound, and which is sufficient for us. We cannot and do not need to ‘transcend’ it into ‘limit’ language and ‘limit’ experience.”¹¹² For this reason, Christianity, according to Frei, is self-referential, it does not need a descriptivist theory of reference to be able to “explain” how it refers to “reality.” Due to this self-reference, the Christian religion is also true beyond the factual reference, by being true to the way it works in a person’s life.¹¹³ For Frei, “the word ‘God’ is used both descriptively and cognitively, but also obediently or trustingly, and it is very difficult to make one a function of the other.”¹¹⁴ Reference then it is not a single or philosophically univocal category within Christianity, as the proponents of the descriptivist theory seem to believe, and the referent of a word depends on its use in the Christian community.¹¹⁵ Frei explicitly indicates in his response to Henry that he does not mean to deny reference at all, but only to deny the univocal notions of reference regarding biblical

¹¹⁰ Frei, 208.

¹¹¹ Frei, 209.

¹¹² Frei, 209.

¹¹³ Frei, 210.

¹¹⁴ Frei, 210.

¹¹⁵ Frei, 210.

language, showing how the narrative descriptions in the biblical text are sufficient.¹¹⁶ For Frei, when the category of reference points to the “historical reality” of Christ’s death and resurrection, he has no option but to affirm that “historical reality,” but what he wants to show is precisely that the “historical” category is not the one that the church employed in the past and it is not a category that is theory-free or neutral.¹¹⁷ In this respect, Frei says, “if I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms, I have to speak of the literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory-neutral, trans-cultural, an ingredient in the structure of the human mind and of reality always and everywhere for me.”¹¹⁸ In another example of his position, Frei states that indeed the term “Jesus” refers, as does any ordinary name, but “Jesus Christ” in the biblical text is part of the scriptural witness that does not only refer ordinarily or historically, and this means that it is not possible to know the manner in which it refers. Hence, for the referent of “Jesus Christ”, Frei says, the ordinary language is sufficient in a miraculous manner.¹¹⁹

In a similar response to the one given by Frei, Lindbeck also offered his reply to the problem of reference in postliberal theology. As I showed in the previous section, Dulles accused Lindbeck of negating truth by granting the primary place to coherence over correspondence to objective reality. For Dulles, as Lindbeck notices in his response, postliberal theology seriously undermines and even dismisses the propositional truth of dogma, and here Dulles equates “the truth of dogma” with the propositional truth of Christianity.¹²⁰ However, Lindbeck clarifies in his

¹¹⁶ Frei, 210.

¹¹⁷ Frei, 211.

¹¹⁸ Frei, 211.

¹¹⁹ Frei, 212.

¹²⁰ George Lindbeck, “George Lindbeck Replies to Avery Cardinal Dulles,” *First Things*, January 2004, Number 139, 13.

response that he does not consider that the postliberal cultural-linguistic approach is antithetical to the propositional truth of Christianity. In this respect, Lindbeck says that he already mentioned in *The Nature of Doctrine* that his approach is indeed compatible with “the modest cognitivism or propositionalism represented by at least some classical theorists, of whom Aquinas is a good example.”¹²¹ In Lindbeck’s words, Dulles’s problem with the cultural-linguistic approach is caused by his conceptually confusing presentation of a tripartite division of truth.¹²² Lindbeck acknowledges that this tripartite division of truth—categorical, intrasystematic (coherentist), and ontological (correspondence)—could be wrong interpreted if categorical adequacy and intrasystematic coherence are in themselves considered as sufficient conditions for truth. In this respect, he clarifies that, for him, “categorical adequacy and intrasystematic coherence are ‘truth’ only equivocally. Properly speaking, they are necessary though not sufficient conditions for truth in the third (but primary) sense of correspondence.”¹²³ Hence, Lindbeck differentiates between the justification of belief—for which categorical and intrasystematic “truth” are conditions—and the truth of belief—which for him is a matter of correspondence. For Lindbeck, intrasystematic “truth” is not an alternative but rather a condition for propositional or ontological truth. Hence, for him, it is wrong to conclude that in his cultural-linguistic approach truth is considered as predominantly intrasystemic.¹²⁴ In this respect, Lindbeck also mentions that

a corrected formulation, in contrast, simply notes that special attention to the intrasystematic (and categorical) conditions for affirming ontological truth is inseparable from a cultural-linguistic perspective on a religion such as Christianity. It most emphatically does not imply that the realities which faith affirms and trusts are in the slightest degree intrasystemic. They are not dependent on the performative faith of

¹²¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 14.

¹²² Lindbeck, “George Lindbeck Replies to Avery Cardinal Dulles,” 14.

¹²³ Lindbeck, 15.

¹²⁴ Lindbeck, 15.

believers (as if, for example, Christ rose from the dead only in the faith of the Church), but are objectively independent.¹²⁵

Therefore, for Lindbeck, the categorical and intrasystemic elements are necessary in order to rightly affirm the ontological truth.¹²⁶ Hence, he says, the terms “postmodern” and “relativist” cannot be applied to him.¹²⁷

These responses from Frei and Lindbeck to Henry and Dulles have originated, in turn, other responses from postliberal supporters such as George Hunsinger, Jeffrey Hensley, and William Placher. Hunsinger has tried to clarify Frei’s position by stating that Henry misreads Frei. For Hunsinger, Frei explicitly insists that Christian theology continues to assert the historicity of the Christ event, and therefore, the importance of the historical referent of the Gospel narratives. In this respect, Hunsinger mentions that Frei requires two assurances from historical criticism: “first, that Christ’s resurrection has not been historically disconfirmed; and second, ‘that a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God’s nearness, did exist and was finally executed.’”¹²⁸ Therefore, the main issue is that Frei and Henry differ on how the narratives refer. On the one hand, Henry insists on a literal or univocal reference, while Frei insists that the texts contain both a textual referent and a historical referent. For Frei, the reference is analogical, which means that the narratives not only refer to the earthly or historical Jesus, “but also and at the same time to the risen Jesus Christ who lives to all eternity, and who attests himself to us through those narratives here and now.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Lindbeck, 15.

¹²⁶ Lindbeck, 15.

¹²⁷ Lindbeck, 15.

¹²⁸ George Hunsinger, “What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry/Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered,” *Pro Ecclesia* 5, no. 2 (1996): 173; Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 151; Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 258.

¹²⁹ Hunsinger, “What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other?,” 176.

Regarding the postliberal position in the realism/antirealism debate, Jeffrey Hensley contends that Lindbeck's theology is not committed to an anti-realist metaphysics but that it is actually metaphysically neutral. This neutrality, he says, "indicates that there are no methodological constraints built into postliberalism that would prevent it from being oriented around a realist metaphysics."¹³⁰ In order to support this claim, Hensley interprets Lindbeck's intratextuality—his desire of the scriptural text to absorb the world—as evidence that, in Lindbeck's thought, there is a "real" world that the text must absorb.¹³¹ Hensley says,

the narrative of the text does not *create* the world, nor does the reality of the world, as it were, *create* the text, but they instead derive their existence apart from each other. Lindbeck's point is that if theology is understood intratextually, then the biblical narratives shape the way Christians view the extrascriptural world. Christians should see the world, as it were, through the 'lenses' of their Christian identity as rendered by Scripture [emphasis in original].¹³²

Therefore, while it appears that Lindbeck is committed to a form of conceptual antirealism, Hensley does not interpret him in this manner.¹³³ He says that, for Lindbeck, meaning, and not existence, is conceptually relative. The narrative framework rendered by Scripture absorbs the world in the sense that biblical idioms and concepts should pervade the way extrascriptural realities are understood. For Lindbeck, Scripture creates its own domain of meaning, and therefore, the task of interpretation is to extend this over the whole of reality.¹³⁴ Hence, for

¹³⁰ Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealist? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," 71.

¹³¹ Hensley, 75.

¹³² Hensley, 76; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 117.

¹³³ According to Hensley, conceptual antirealists claim that concepts are the instruments people use to cut up the world into the objects of their experience. Apart from such conceptual cuts, so antirealists argue, there "are" no objects of experience. However, he says, conceptual antirealists are not idealists that deny the existence of some ordinary category of entities like material objects. They do not claim that the literal existence of everything—both mental and physical objects—is dependent upon the occurrence of human conceptualizing but that the concept of "existence" must be understood as relative to our conceptual schemes. Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealist? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," 72–74.

¹³⁴ Hensley, 76.

Hensley, Lindbeck is not arguing that the world's existence and nature are relative to conceptual frameworks, but the world metaphysically exists independently of any framework. However, every framework deeply influences the way the world of entities and their kinds is perceived. In that sense, Christians should view the world intratextually, as absorbed by the conceptual framework of Christian Scripture.¹³⁵ According to Hensley, Lindbeck's perspective is compatible with metaphysical realism because, from his particular realist viewpoint, concepts function as bridges between us and the world, connecting two independently existing objects, and therefore, are necessary for getting from one object to another. In agreement with some accounts of realism, Lindbeck is highlighting the fact that what we grasp through concepts is the properties these objects possess, and our conceptual schemes make sense of those properties.¹³⁶ Therefore, Hensley says,

if concepts are the grasping of properties, and objects have natures or properties independent of our conceptual grasping of them, as the realist claims, then the realist can agree with full consistency that perception is concept- or theory-laden and yet hold that we perceive mind-independent entities through the senses. Consequently, when Lindbeck asserts that all experience of reality is concept laden, he is not necessarily denying realism or asserting conceptual antirealism. He is instead simply noting that we as human cognizers necessarily use concepts to describe and understand our experience. Concepts bridge rather than screen our idioms for understanding reality with reality itself.¹³⁷

According to Hensley, besides being characterized as a conceptual antirealist, Lindbeck has also been interpreted as an alethic antirealist.¹³⁸ That is, as an antirealist with respect to truth due to his understanding of doctrines. Hensley asks,

¹³⁵ Hensley, 76.

¹³⁶ Hensley, 77.

¹³⁷ Hensley, 78.

¹³⁸ Hensley mentions that alethic antirealism claims that truth is likewise relative to human conceptual schemes, it will always depend on conceptual interpretations of experience. In this respect, for alethic antirealism, truth is radically epistemic, it underscores the relationship among sentences or beliefs themselves, rather than, in the realist sense, as a relationship of sentences or beliefs to something external to the mind, such as a mind-independent

[I]f Christian theology, in asserting various doctrines, lays out the rules for how Christians should talk and behave, then isn't it the case that the truth of those doctrines is in some sense dependent upon the Christian conceptual scheme? In other words, isn't Lindbeck committed to the claim that the truth of doctrine does not depend upon some reference or correspondence to a state of affairs that is independent of that conceptual scheme?¹³⁹

He notices that Lindbeck indeed considers that doctrines “assert nothing either true or false about God and his relation to creatures, but only speak about such assertions.”¹⁴⁰ But Hensley interprets that Lindbeck is making a claim about theological utterances functioning as doctrines, as second-order statements or rules that govern Christian discourse, and not a claim about theological statements functioning as first-order assertions.¹⁴¹ For example, says Hensley, “when the statement ‘Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine’ functions as a first-order statement uttered in the context of worship, it makes a truth claim concerning the nature of the person Jesus of Nazareth. But as a second-order statement uttered in an academic lecture on Christology, it states a rule about the limits of christological discourse.”¹⁴² Therefore, in this example, the latter use of the statement as doctrine does not make a truth claim *per se*, but rather governs or regulates what truth claims are appropriate for Christians. For Hensley, this distinction between the two uses of theological statements is crucial because it is what allows doctrinal statements to have validity when conceptual categories undergo fundamental change.¹⁴³ So, for Hensley, Lindbeck maintains that when doctrines function as first-order statements, they have a truth-

world. If truth is relative to human conceptual schemes, then, according to alethic antirealism, for a sentence to be true means merely that humans have warrant to believe it. Hensley, 74.

¹³⁹ Hensley, 78.

¹⁴⁰ Hensley, 78; Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 69.

¹⁴¹ Hensley, “Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealist? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck’s Postliberal Theology,” 78.

¹⁴² Hensley, 78.

¹⁴³ Hensley, 78–79.

value. However, the question about an alethic antirealism remains if this truth value is relative to the Christian conceptual scheme. As a response to this accusation of alethic antirealism, Hensley says that for Lindbeck, truth is best understood as fixed by a combination of an internal coherence of the statement under consideration with other statements within the discourse—which is the notion of intrasystematic truth—and a correspondence of the entire collection of statements with reality—which is the notion of ontological truth. Therefore, says Hensley, correspondence to reality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for fixing truth in Lindbeck’s view. Correspondence for Lindbeck “involves the entire conceptual framework and practice of the religion corresponding in some measure ‘to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things,’ but one need not specify how that correspondence takes place in order to be justified in claiming it.”¹⁴⁴ Hence, says Hensley, it is clear that Lindbeck is not asserting a purely epistemic or antirealist account of truth because he does not maintain that truth is fixed solely by the coherence of statements within a given conceptual framework. For Hensley, “it appears that Lindbeck maintains a realist or non-epistemic account of truth, whereby truth is thought of as an internal coherence of propositions which as a whole relate to particular states of affairs.”¹⁴⁵

William Placher states that both Frei and Lindbeck can be read in two different ways regarding the problem of reference in postliberal theology. In a first reading of Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic model, religious language seems to not refer to anything beyond itself. In this model, asking about reference in connection to historical events or ontological realities beyond the use of a religious community would be to misunderstand the way religious language

¹⁴⁴ Hensley, 79.

¹⁴⁵ Hensley, 79.

works.¹⁴⁶ However, Lindbeck could also be read as proposing something less radical than a complete intrasystemic notion of religious language. For Placher, Lindbeck is claiming that doctrines function culturally-linguistically as doctrines. Hence, religious language might make historical or ontological claims, although they would not have doctrinal authority.¹⁴⁷ In this respect, Placher says, Lindbeck himself could be considered as a sort of crypto-cognitivist, affirming modest cognitive claims and only insisting that one need not make such claims in order to affirm religious doctrine.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, says Placher, Frei's work also admits more than one reading. Frei's insistence that the meaning of the biblical narratives remains unchanged whether or not these stories report history or point to a reference seems to undercut their claim on reality. However, according to Placher, it is possible to read Frei as taking the Gospel stories to be about the historical Jesus, to refer to his historical figure, although the details of these stories need not refer to actual events.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, Placher considers that on a strong version of the cultural-linguistic model, the question about a referent disappears because religious language does not refer to anything beyond a particular language world. However, as Placher shows, "it is not clear whether either Lindbeck or Frei adopts such a strong version of the cultural-linguistic model as an account of all religious language. Sometimes, at least, Lindbeck allows for a modified cognitivism, and Frei admits the legitimacy of questions of historical reference."¹⁵⁰

Even with Frei's and Lindbeck's responses to the problem of reference, together with the interpretations of Hunsinger, Hensley, and Placher of Frei's and Lindbeck's work, the problem

¹⁴⁶ William C. Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology: A Conflict of Interpretations?," *Modern Theology* 4, no. 1 (October 1987): 46.

¹⁴⁷ Placher, 46.

¹⁴⁸ Placher, 46–47.

¹⁴⁹ Placher, 47–48.

¹⁵⁰ Placher, 48.

of reference remains. Taking Placher's distinction between a strong version of the cultural-linguistic model and a weaker one, Knight states that this weaker view seems to be a better interpretation of Frei's and Lindbeck's work, although the reference problem within postliberal theology is still present in this weaker view.¹⁵¹ According to Knight, Frei's thought on the question of reference remains confusing because he maintains the need to affirm the truth of the Gospel narratives by holding the notion of a translinguistic reference, but, at the same time, he insists that meaning is independent of it, making the translinguistic reference relevant to determine truth but not to determine meaning. In order to make this distinction, as I noticed before, Frei offers a notion of a dual reference, which includes a historical referent and a textual one. In this way, the historical translinguistic reference is not obviated but it remains independent of and separable from meaning. However, for Knight, the fact that Frei does not unpack this notion of a textual reference evidences a fundamental fissure in his thought, which is reinforced by his resistance to provide any theoretical analysis of reference as a whole.¹⁵²

According to Knight, there are two possible interpretations of Frei's notion of meaning independent of a translinguistic reference, and although one of them is very problematic, Frei's thought remains ambiguous. The first possible interpretation is that holding a notion of meaning independent from reference can imply that meaning is not determined by reference. However, it can also imply that there is no relation whatsoever between the two. In the first interpretation, says Knight, it is possible that the two are related not in the sense that reference determines meaning but that meaning determines reference, while, at the same time, reference contributes to, but does not determine, meaning. The problem is that, for Knight, the second interpretation

¹⁵¹ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 258.

¹⁵² Knight, 255–61.

seems to be closer to what Frei actually holds. That is, that meaning and reference bear no relation to one another. In Knight's view, this implies that Frei follows a later Wittgensteinian understanding of linguistic meaning as use in a language game, leaving the status of reference unclear because of the difficulties with Wittgenstein's notion of meaning.¹⁵³

For Knight, there are two main difficulties regarding the postliberal appropriation of Wittgenstein's view of meaning, and these are related to the very notion of meaning-as-use in Wittgenstein and to Frei's particular appropriation of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.¹⁵⁴ The first difficulty is that in the postliberal appropriation of Wittgenstein's view of meaning, the meaning of a word is no longer located in the speaker but in the substantial agreement of a linguistic community. What determines whether the usage of a word is correct or incorrect for Wittgenstein is the form of life of a specific community. However, against this idea of meaning, Knight states that it is possible to imagine a situation where a person's past intention, rather than an internalized rule, could provide the standard by which to judge the correct or incorrect use of words.¹⁵⁵ Hence, it is possible to distinguish correct and incorrect usage of a word due to an internal rule and not only due to the agreement of a linguistic community.¹⁵⁶ In this sense, Wittgenstein's proposal does not eliminate the possibility that perceptions can provide content to thoughts—that is, the possibility of connecting meaning with reference—and, therefore, using language meaningfully is possible without community agreement.¹⁵⁷ Knight says, “it is intuitively plausible that linguistic conventions play some role in determinations of correct usage

¹⁵³ Knight, 261–63.

¹⁵⁴ Knight, 245.

¹⁵⁵ Knight, 246.

¹⁵⁶ Knight, 245–46.

¹⁵⁷ Knight, 246–47.

and hence of meaning, but it is too large a leap to move from that conclusion to the conclusion that linguistic meaning *just* is a community agreement.”¹⁵⁸ The second difficulty regarding the postliberal appropriation of Wittgenstein’s view of meaning is Frei’s particular use of Wittgenstein. Knight states that Frei fails to make a distinction between semantics from speech acts, refusing to allow any role for reference to determine meaning.¹⁵⁹ Following Nicholas Wolterstorff, Knight says that Frei blurs the distinction between speaker meaning—or author meaning—and semantic meaning—or text meaning, and the consequence of this is that Frei ends up understanding narratives as sequences of propositions rather than as sequences of speech acts, insisting that realistic narratives must be interpreted in a neutral way regardless of whether they are history or fiction. However, for Knight, making a claim about an actual person named Jesus will express a different proposition from making a claim about a character named Jesus in a fictional story. The difference is that, in the former case, the name “Jesus” is a singular referring expression, and the proposition is true if and only if the reference succeeds and the referent person exists—or did exist—and bears—or bore—the properties predicated of him in the proposition. That is, the referent of “Jesus” in a fictional story will be different from the referent of “Jesus” in a historical account. This difference in referents will result in the story’s expressing different propositions, and these different propositions expressed in the story may have different truth values, if they have truth values at all.¹⁶⁰ Due to Wolterstorff’s argument, Knight concludes that criteria for assigning truth values will differ for propositions expressed in a fictional story than for those expressed in a historical story. Therefore, determining which propositions are being expressed in the narrative depends on some prior, “extra-story” determination of whether

¹⁵⁸ Knight, 248.

¹⁵⁹ Knight, 250.

¹⁶⁰ Knight, 252.

the story is fictional or historical. That is, interpreting the sense or meaning of the biblical narrative includes a judgment about which parts are historical and which parts are not.¹⁶¹

According to Knight, these two problems of the postliberal appropriation of Wittgenstein's philosophy cause confusion about the relation of reference to meaning, which causes further confusion about the postliberal perspective on truth and its relation with the biblical narratives.¹⁶²

For Knight, since Frei takes reference to be relevant only to questions of truth and not to questions of meaning, "we are left in a quandary. For it is propositions that are the bearers of truth values, and if reference is irrelevant to the meaning of the sentences that express those propositions but relevant to questions of truth, then it is not at all clear just how questions of truth should be approached."¹⁶³ In this sense, says Knight, "Frei's insistence on the independence of meaning and reference leave him no conceptual means to negotiate the fissure between meaning and reference in a way that renders the claims contained in the narratives amenable to any coherent analysis of their truth."¹⁶⁴ That is, Frei's ambiguous position ultimately suggests that the postliberal project stands in need of a theory of truth.¹⁶⁵ Regarding this need, Placher seems to concur with Knight's perspective. Although Placher embraces postliberal theology, regarding Frei's positions on reference he says,

Frei's account can seem to collapse the revealed Word into the written Word, a written Word that witnesses to nothing beyond itself... The problem may be that, in the absence of any general theory of truth and reference, readers will tend to carry over our cultural assumptions about what is real and how texts in general mean. When Frei approaches the question of the reference of these texts so cautiously, then against the background of the

¹⁶¹ Knight, 252–53.

¹⁶² Knight, 253.

¹⁶³ Knight, 264.

¹⁶⁴ Knight, 264.

¹⁶⁵ Knight, 263.

rather simple empiricism that still dominates much of our thinking, he seems to undercut their claim on reality.¹⁶⁶

In the same vein, Knight underscores several elements in Placher's judgment of Frei that seem to point out to the need for a theory of language and truth in postliberal theology. He mentions that, for Placher, the combination of Frei's refusal to offer a theory of reference, his repeated insistence that reference is irrelevant to the meaning of the biblical narratives, and his frequent use of language implying that the narratives do not refer to extratextual realities, is "a dangerous business."¹⁶⁷ For Placher, affirming reference while insisting that the mode of such reference is in principle incomprehensible and, at the same time, refusing any general theory of reference is dangerous because it risks the implication that the narratives witness to nothing beyond themselves.¹⁶⁸ In this regard, Placher explicitly says: "having argued that Ricoeur's thought faces problems on the question of the reference of the biblical narratives, I wanted to acknowledge that Lindbeck and Frei have not sorted it out very well either. Finding an answer to this problem seems to me a central item for the agenda of postliberal theology."¹⁶⁹ Regarding Placher's statement here, Knight says, "so far as I'm aware, this problem remains on its agenda more than twenty-five years after Placher wrote these words."¹⁷⁰

It is possible to say, to conclude this chapter, that postliberal theology rejects the descriptivist theory of language that liberal theology assumes. That is, Frei and Lindbeck reject the notion that meaning is acquired descriptively in connection to its reference. For postliberals, it is not possible to know the meaning of the biblical text by pointing to an external referent

¹⁶⁶ Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology," 48.

¹⁶⁷ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 260–61.

¹⁶⁸ Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology," 48–49.

¹⁶⁹ Placher, 49.

¹⁷⁰ Knight, *Liberalism Versus Postliberalism*, 261.

outside the biblical narrative. Hence, postliberal theology entails a different understanding of meaning that functions as an alternative to the descriptivist theory of language. In the postliberal alternative, meaning is constituted by the community usage of the biblical narrative. In this sense, the postliberal proposal is related to Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning as meaning-as-use. However, by assuming a different notion of meaning, the postliberal alternative seems to reject the importance of reference to determine truth in theological language, hence the persistent problem of reference in postliberal theology that I have underscored in this chapter. The problem of reference in postliberal theology is a major issue for many conservative theologians because, in order to determine whether any theological claim is true, and also to determine under what circumstances is justified to believe, conservatives hold that the only option to confirm theological claims is within the parameters of the descriptivist theory of language. For most conservative theologians, the Christian religion requires the propositional truth of an ontological correspondence in order to base its theological claims, and this propositional truth and ontological correspondence is connected to a descriptivist theory of language. In this respect, the conservative critics of postliberal theology also consider that, by presenting an alternative notion of meaning and denying the descriptivist theory of language, postliberals also seems to assume an anti-realist perspective when it comes to religious language. Therefore, since postliberal theology rejects a descriptivist theory of language, Knight and Placher seem to consider that an alternative theory of reference is imperative in order to meet the demand for confirmation of its theological claims. However, postliberal theology dismisses the descriptivist theory of language and rejects the role of reference in the determination of meaning without providing any other theory of language. In this regard, although Frei's and Lindbeck's responses have clearly shown that the rejection of a descriptivist theory of language does not entail to discard reference

altogether, these responses are not sufficient. That is, the question about the possibility of granting a place for reference without holding a descriptivist theory of language has not been completely answered because without a specific theory of language, say the critics, this problem of reference remains. The insistence on the independence of meaning and reference seems to leave postliberal theology without conceptual means to negotiate the fissure between meaning and reference in connection to truth and a realist theological perspective. Therefore, finding an answer to the problem of reference, and showing how it is possible to construct a theology that does not need to maintain a foundationalist position by holding a reference theory of language, seems to be a current and persistent theological issue in postliberal theology. In this respect, offering not just particular responses to the problem of reference, such as Frei's and Lindbeck's responses, but a comprehensive one, showing how a postliberal theological method can confirm its theological claims without the need to succumb to the logic of a foundationalist epistemology, is still imperative. In this regard, the theological method of James Wm. McClendon Jr. is a valuable resource, as I will show in the next chapters.

Chapter 2

James McClendon's Theological Work and Method

Solving the problem of reference without succumbing to the logic of a foundationalist epistemology, and therefore without holding a theory of reference, seems to be a current and persistent problem in postliberal theology. In this respect, this chapter and the next one aim to offer McClendon's theological method as a solution for this postliberal predicament. According to Adonis Vidu, McClendon is perhaps one of the most neglected postliberal theologians.¹⁷¹ McClendon was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1924 and passed away in 2000. He first studied at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and later at Princeton Theological Seminary. Eventually, he came back to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to earn a Th.D. His main teaching positions were at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary, the Graduate Theological Union, and in the latter decade of his life, Fuller Theological Seminary. He also served in the United States Navy during the tail end of World War II and was profoundly affected by what he saw in post-war Japan.¹⁷² Ryan A. Newson and Andrew C. Wright state that McClendon formulated a fresh approach to the theological task in relation to the intellectual and social shifts of his time, such that he tended to find himself a step or two ahead of his peers. His life spanned the last three-quarters of the twentieth century. McClendon wrote, taught, and preached in a wide variety of settings from the late 1950s until his death in October of 2000.¹⁷³ According to Newson and Wright, "McClendon was using J. L. Austin's philosophical work to negotiate a third way beyond the twin errors of hard relativism and dogmatic absolutism before many theologians saw

¹⁷¹ Adonis Vidu, *Postliberal Theological Method: A Critical Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 31.

¹⁷² James Wm. McClendon Jr., "The Radical Road One Baptist Took," in *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition*, ed. John D. Roth (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 15–24.

¹⁷³ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.*, ed. Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 1.

this as a possibility.”¹⁷⁴ McClendon was also at the forefront of the narrative theology movement and was attuned to the radical social implications inherent to the gospel even before his encounter with John Howard Yoder, working on the margins both of his own Baptist community as well as the academic “establishment” and becoming one of the most widely respected but rarely consulted theologians in America.¹⁷⁵ In this regard, Curtis W. Freeman says: “McClendon's ‘third way’ has sometimes been politely ignored by standard-account theologians, but on other occasions, it has been met by harsh criticism from those that claim to speak for Protestants or Catholics.”¹⁷⁶

Due to McClendon having been indeed rarely consulted, politely ignored, or simply neglected, his theology has not been sufficiently explored and has usually been reduced to a mere “baptist” perspective. However, McClendon proposes a theology that has no need for a theory of reference, but nonetheless grants an important place for reference. In that sense, he develops a theology that is postfoundationalist and postliberal. I will describe how McClendon’s theological method responds to the problem of reference in the next chapter, but in order to do it effectively, this second chapter aims to present an overview of McClendon’s theological work, focusing on his theological method. In this respect, I deem that McClendon’s three volumes of *Systematic Theology—Ethics, Doctrine, and Witness*—could not be properly understood without the background of two of his previous works, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* and *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*. Both works were published in 1974, while the first volume of McClendon’s systematic—*Ethics*—was published in 1986.

¹⁷⁴ McClendon Jr., *The Collected Works*, 1:1.

¹⁷⁵ McClendon Jr., *The Collected Works*, 1:1–2.

¹⁷⁶ Curtis W. Freeman, “Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists,” in James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, Ethics (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), xiv.

Hence, I will begin my exposition by referring to these two preliminary works in the first two sections, to then address McClendon's *Systematic Theology* in the third and last section, offering in this way an overview of McClendon's work.

I

James McClendon's Biography as Theology

According to Curtis Freeman, McClendon's first big academic breakthrough came with the publication of *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* in 1974, which also introduced him as a member of the flourishing narrative theology movement.¹⁷⁷ In this work, McClendon argues that by paying attention to the lives of the "saints"—the lives of some exemplary Christians—it is possible to identify a specific theology in the guiding images and narratives that make them who they are. At the beginning of *Biography as Theology*, McClendon addresses the contemporary necessity for ethics to present the qualities of human character in the individual and the community. He states that it is currently necessary to have an ethics of character-in-community.¹⁷⁸ For him, the focus on character will allow ethics to enter a new level in the moral realm, a level that recognizes that acting and being are not separated human characteristics.¹⁷⁹ Character for McClendon is coincident with the deepest and most dearly held beliefs. That is, coincident with the convictions that are fostered in different communities.¹⁸⁰ Here, McClendon defines the term "convictions" as

those tenacious beliefs which when held give definiteness to the character of a person or of a community, so that if they were surrendered, the person or community would be

¹⁷⁷ Freeman, viii.

¹⁷⁸ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2002), 6, 15.

¹⁷⁹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 16.

¹⁸⁰ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 17–18.

significantly changed... Convictions are particular and immediate in form, and may not be consciously formulated by their holders at all, yet when we do find our convictions, we find the best clue to ourselves.¹⁸¹

It is at this point that, according to McClendon, an ethics of character connects with theology, because theology is also concerned with convictions. In that sense, for McClendon,

the best way to understand theology is to see it, not as the study about God (for there are godless theologies as well as godly ones), but as the investigation of the convictions of a convictional community, discovering its convictions, interpreting them, criticizing them in the light of all that we can know, and creatively transforming them into better ones if possible.¹⁸²

In this respect, all convictions are at bottom theological, and only artificially can ethical convictions be segregated from the rest. Therefore, theology and an ethics of character are “roommates,” sharing the same space and obliged to come to terms with each other’s concerns.¹⁸³ For McClendon,

Theology may have to acknowledge that a theology of revelation or of reason, or a theology of secularity or of religiosity, if it does not enter into the actual shape of the lives of the people in its community of concern, is after all irrelevant to these lives. Does the meeting place of the two, then, lie in the investigation of actual character, with consequences for each partner in the investigation? ... It must be clear that in this investigation there can be no *a priori* segregation of ethics from theology proper.¹⁸⁴

For McClendon, convictions must be defined or identified not only as things that people know, or believe, or believe they know, but also, they need to be distinguished from principles, which are often consciously formed, contrary to convictions that are often unconsciously lived by or lived out. In this regard, convictions, in McClendon’s view, are affective and volitional as well as cognitive, representing the stake of the convinced person or community in the world.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 19–20.

¹⁸² McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

¹⁸³ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 21.

¹⁸⁴ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 163.

Due to these characteristics, convictions, unlike images but like principles, are capable of being expressed in sentences with subject and predicate. McClendon recognizes that convictions may be suppressed or hidden even from the person that holds them, but in principle, they can be expressible in propositions.¹⁸⁶ In this sense, he states that certain aspects of the general structure of language can provide a way to understand the structure of convictions generally, and the intellectual tools that help to analyze language can be used to discover the shape of particular human character and particular human community. Hence, for McClendon, this parallel between life and speech makes it possible to understand not only what people mean by what they say but also to understand the connection between what religious communities say and their convictions. This is important for McClendon because the fact that human life is lived by convinced people is the central feature that makes theology possible. In attending to convictions, he says, theology is in position not only to learn which convictions govern particular people and groups but also to discover which ones are theologically justified.¹⁸⁷

According to McClendon, due to Christian convictions being influenced—negated, enlarged, altered, or reinforced—by the lives of significant persons within the Christian community, the “saints”, engaging in a biographical reflection on the saint’s lives is the proper task of Christian theology.¹⁸⁸ He says,

by recognizing that Christian beliefs are not so many “propositions” to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins by attending to lived lives. Theology must be at least biography. If by attending to those lives, we find ways of reforming our own theologies, making them more true, more faithful to our

¹⁸⁶ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 163–64.

¹⁸⁷ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 164.

¹⁸⁸ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 22.

ancient vision, more adequate to the age now being born, then we will be justified in that arduous inquiry. Biography at its best will be theology.¹⁸⁹ This endeavor could also be called a “theology of character,” because an ethical concern with character necessarily implies questions that must receive theological answers, and these answers could best be found through an investigation of lives that incarnate the life Christian faith aims to.¹⁹⁰ These singular lives that incarnate the Christian character, the character of Christ, are the “saints,” not in a biblical sense but in the historic sense of striking and exemplary members of the Christian community.¹⁹¹

In this theology of character or biographical theology, a key element that McClendon underscores is the dominant or controlling images that are present in the lives under theological consideration. For him, the convergence of the different images in a particular person helps to form that person’s characteristic vision or outlook. That is, it is the vision that governs that person’s life.¹⁹² Hence, for McClendon, the Christian faith consists in the application to one’s own circumstances of appropriate biblical images, and this is also the case with people from other religions. The difference, in that case, is that people from other religions draw images from other sources, although Christians are usually also formed by extra-biblical images.¹⁹³ In that respect, in McClendon’s view, there are different religions because different communities use different images that are traditional or canonical for them. These images or metaphors have been enriched by previous, prototypical employments, which, due to this use, become traditional or canonical metaphors that bear the content of faith itself for specific communities.¹⁹⁴ In that sense,

¹⁸⁹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 22.

¹⁹⁰ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 22.

¹⁹¹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 23.

¹⁹² McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 69.

¹⁹³ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 74–75.

¹⁹⁴ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 75.

McClendon's argument for biographical theology is that the "biographical subjects have contributed to the theology of the community of sharers of their faith especially by showing how certain great archetypical images of that faith do apply to their own lives and circumstances, and by extension to our own."¹⁹⁵ Metaphors, in McClendon's perspective, are decisive in forming a judgment or guiding a specific action, even though they are not factually informative, and because of that, they differ from a simile in power or force and in the very work that is done with words.¹⁹⁶ As an example, McClendon refers to the ancient Christian rite of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. He states that what happens in the ritual meal is not that bread is said to be, or seen as, or taken as, the body of the Church's Lord, but that *this*—the bread— *is* (in some sense) *that*—the body of the lord. The whole ritual is an enacted imagery for McClendon, and due to Christian faith comprising images applied to life, faith must involve the examination of the role of images in actual lives, the role of images in the experience of life. That is, the Christian faith must develop a biographic theology.¹⁹⁷

According to McClendon, the dominant or controlling images that describe the Christian life are stepped in doctrine. It is only possible to understand people's lives in light of doctrine because images are theological doctrine, their point is the point of the doctrine.¹⁹⁸ When people claim that they accept, believe, and are convinced by a specific Christian doctrine, that doctrine becomes a controlling *motif* in their lives that it is revealed in what people say and do. That is, how they apply the images to the events of their own lives, which is why people's lives are what

¹⁹⁵ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 75.

¹⁹⁶ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 76.

¹⁹⁷ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 77.

¹⁹⁸ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 79.

declare a doctrine validated.¹⁹⁹ As an example, in reference to the doctrine of atonement in the lives of Martin Luther King Jr. and Dag Hammarskjöld, McClendon says that “if there were no such lives we should be imperiously urged to acknowledge that this doctrine had lost its power; if in the future there should be no more such lives, we should then have to make that concession. But as matters stand, these men [King and Hammarskjöld] are the vivifiers, the exemplars, of the doctrine of the cross.”²⁰⁰ Therefore, in McClendon’s view, theology reports what the community or the community’s best teachers have said but also asks whether that can be said today, whether it can be believed today. In this respect, theology is not a mere historical enterprise.²⁰¹ People that live out the Christian doctrines highlight what must be stressed and what may be laid aside within those doctrines.²⁰² Going back to the example of the doctrine of atonement that King and Hammarskjöld lived out, McClendon says that for neither of them was the question of the scientific availability of the Christ of the Gospels a central one in their apprehension of the Christian doctrine of atonement. There is no hint in the religious experience of Hammarskjöld or King that Christian events or teachings must be validated by historical research before faith can flourish. This does not imply that, for McClendon, Jesus was not a historical person, or that the whole theological community should neglect the details of his historicity, but it does provide a clue—in this case, a negative clue—for what is important in theology today, what is important to believe today.²⁰³ For McClendon, emphasizing the metaphors and images in people’s lives does not diminish theology’s role of speaking truth about God. For him,

¹⁹⁹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 79–80.

²⁰⁰ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 79–80.

²⁰¹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 77–79.

²⁰² McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 80.

²⁰³ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 85.

to speak truly and faithfully of God is indeed to speak in models, images, analogies—we have no other way. Yet images can speak not only falsehood but also truth. Some set of images, some vision of reality, is better than all the rest because truer, more faithful, more open to hard fact and to beauty and to wonder—more open to the realms of science, of art, and of faith. To note that science depends upon models, art upon abstract forms, and religion upon images, is not to reject these realms, but to open the way to the full discovery of the vision they evoke, the truth they can tell.²⁰⁴

According to McClendon, the different images present in the life of a “saint” give to that life its characteristic flavor. These images come from the tradition in which that “saint” participates. That is why different Christians are formed by different sets of images within the larger manifold. For McClendon, images shape a particular life but also reflect its shape to others.²⁰⁵ He says, “to know its images is so far to know a life, particularly to know it in connection with its creative sources (its ‘scripture’ and ‘tradition’) and its creative possibilities (the influence that life may have on others’ lives).”²⁰⁶

Due to biography being one form of story, McClendon states that it is necessary to establish if it is possible to express theology not only through propositions but also *via* narrative or story. At first, says McClendon, a biographical theology seems radically at odds with traditional propositional theology because of its narrative form. However, in the current theological discussion, there is a rebirth of interest in story and theology.²⁰⁷ McClendon highlights that human experience necessarily has a narrative form, and the time-defying strategies of modern intellectual work—conceptual abstraction and the phenomenological contraction of attention—cannot ever really overcome this necessary form.²⁰⁸ In this respect, he says: “the ‘sacred stories,’ by which primitive people live their lives, are representative of the

²⁰⁴ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 87.

²⁰⁵ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 162.

²⁰⁶ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 162.

²⁰⁷ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 158.

²⁰⁸ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 159.

dwelling places of all human beings; we all live in some ‘story’ or other.”²⁰⁹ For McClendon, the fact that biography is a form of story that is distinguished by being always a true human story—at least in intention—makes it the form of story most nearly suited to the Christian faith.²¹⁰ Another important reason to undertake a biographical theology, in McClendon’s view, is that, against Schleiermacher, religious experience is better understood not in an abstract or compressed form, but only and exactly in the durational form of a narrative. He says that, in theology, there has been assigned a misleading priority to the cognitive compressed, non-durational, and abstract products of actual or durational religious experience. In that sense, biographies, as the smallest discrete units in which experience can be reported, are better suited to offer an account of religious experience. That is, religious experiences are life-experiences with God.²¹¹

For McClendon, the lives of “saints” are not useful to discovered features or aims of Christian faith and life. Usefulness would imply that these characteristics and goals are logically prior to the lives that exhibit them.²¹² In this case, says McClendon, “biographical theology would necessarily depend on this prior knowledge, and biographical investigation might be remanded to the realm of illustrations for theology lectures or sermons.”²¹³ That is why McClendon prefers to seek the connection between the dominant images that shape the life of the subjects and the tradition in which the subjects stand, which also connect the subjects relate to Christians today, to the extent that these images “speak” today too. That is, for McClendon, the

²⁰⁹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 159.

²¹⁰ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 159.

²¹¹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 159–60.

²¹² McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 161.

²¹³ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 161.

compelling aspect of the lives of the subjects—the “saints”—is more powerful than a specific propositional theology.²¹⁴ In this respect, he says: “Jesus compels, St. Francis compels, I think Clarence Jordan compels; the doctrine we may draw from their life stories, if it is compelling, is so just because it had prior embodiment in them and may be embodied again.”²¹⁵ Hence, the mere existence of the witness of the “saints” does not confirm the Christian doctrine by itself—witnesses might be themselves deceived concerning Christian truth, and what their lives are really saying could be misunderstood. However, these life experiences make Christian doctrine a real issue, a live option, by confronting people here and now.²¹⁶

According to McClendon, theology is truly Christian only as it bases itself afresh upon its own origin. In that sense, there is, for McClendon a “primacy of the primitive.” This primacy could be exercised from the perspective of a propositional theology, with a focus on abstract concepts, or from the perspective of a biographical theology, that focuses upon lives. A biographical theology considers that the center must be the lives themselves. Even more, the focus must be on the life of Christ, the one who rose and lives in his community. For McClendon, the lives of the “saints” are part of the life of Christ, but they are not in the same way a part of the life of Jesus.²¹⁷ Regarding this participation, he states

while the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth is necessary for Christian theology, it is not sufficient. What is lacking in a theology concerned only with Jesus may be fulfilled in attention to Christ... The solitary life [of Jesus] is now the shared life of those whom he redeems. They are in Christ; Christ is in them (Gal. 1:22; Rom. 8:10). The life of Christ cannot be told without the whole New Testament, without the whole history of the “God Movement,” without the whole human story *annis domini*—in the years of the Lord. In this sense, the lives of our saints significantly participate in the life of Christ; telling their

²¹⁴ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 161.

²¹⁵ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 161–62.

²¹⁶ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 148–49.

²¹⁷ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 166–67.

stories is a part of telling *the* story.²¹⁸

In connection to this participation, McClendon highlights that the character that is investigated in a biographical study is always character-in-community. None of the “saints” can be understood unless we understand their participation in communities of faith and other human communities as well. This is important for McClendon because convictions are formed in connection with life in community. In this sense, for him, biographical theology is not isolated from propositional theology nor is isolated from other communities.²¹⁹ McClendon agrees with the notion that doctrines are not just a *motif* embodied in contemporary life stories but a *motif* that can be spelled out in the form of propositions. Therefore, biographical theology need not repudiate and should not ignore the propositional statement of theological doctrine.²²⁰ However, says McClendon,

this propositional statement be in continual and intimate contact with the lived experience which the propositional doctrine by turns collects, orders, and informs. Without such living contact, theological doctrine readily becomes (in a pejorative sense) objective—remote from actual Christian life, a set of empty propositions more suited to attacking rival theologians than to informing the church of God. With this living contact, theology may develop its propositions in the confidence that their meaning is exemplified in contemporary Christian experience.²²¹

II

James McClendon's Convictions

Many different factors in our current societies have produced a global awareness of the diversity of forms of life in our world today. Due to this global awareness, no one can deny today

²¹⁸ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 169–70.

²¹⁹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 170–71.

²²⁰ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 149.

²²¹ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 149.

that a particular worldview, with the values and lifestyles that are attached to it, is just one among many different perspectives of life. In his work *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, written together with the philosopher James M. Smith and published in 1975, McClendon recognizes this widespread awareness of diversity, but he also recognizes the need to respond to the negative consequences of this pluralism—arguments, manifestos, estrangements, revolutions, and wars—and, among them, the widespread relativism that claims that no beliefs are better than any other. Hence, in order to find a way to defuse one side of this relativism, religious relativism, McClendon and Smith propose a method not only to understand religious convictions but also to justify or reject specific convictions.²²² They refer to the term “convictions” instead of “beliefs” to highlight that convictions imply more than just the cognitive sense of a belief. Convictions are, for them, the beliefs that guide the life of a person or community, which are completely connected to their identities, to the point that these convictions “make us what we are.”²²³ In this regard, a conviction for McClendon and Smith is “*a persistent belief such that if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and it cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before* [emphasis in original].”²²⁴ Hence, convictions for them are a type of beliefs that are cognitive as well as conative and affective, connected to what a person or community thinks, hopes, and feels.²²⁵ In that sense, the only sufficient way to know whether a conviction deserves to be believed is to fully understand what that particular conviction means or is.²²⁶ In other

²²² James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 3–4, 16.

²²³ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 4.

²²⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 5.

²²⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 6.

²²⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 16.

words, McClendon and Smith hold that “the full analysis of some convictions is tantamount to their justification.”²²⁷

McClendon’s and Smith’s method can be applied to every conviction, but their main interest in *Convictions* is to provide a basis for the assessment of religious convictions. They state that although religious convictions are fully expressed in the full range of actions of a person or community, it is in the linguistic actions that they are especially revealed. In this respect, McClendon and Smith attend to the way that a religiously convinced person or community expresses their convictions in the full context of their utterance, and for this, they resort to John L. Austin’s speech-act philosophy of language, in order to discover what religious language is and does, and how it is possible to understand and justify religious convictions.²²⁸ As Ryan Andrew Newson mentions, McClendon and Smith focus on Austin’s three “acts” in and around speech in order to understand how language works. These three acts are: (1) the physical act of utterance called the *sentential act*, (2) an utterance’s *illocutionary* force—meaning the way it finds its place in a social context recognized as appropriate and in a way that is able to perform, and (3) its *perlocutionary* force—meaning the affective force, the fact that other persons or states of affair are affected by the speech act.²²⁹ In this respect, following Austin, McClendon’s and Smith’s main point is that “*saying something, talking, speech in the full sense that saying something is a way of acting meaningfully, is to be understood in terms of the crucial significance of the speech-act [emphasis in original] (Austin’s ‘illocutionary act’), rather than in terms of the sentential act or the perlocutionary act.*”²³⁰ As Nancey Murphy says, for Austin, all

²²⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 16.

²²⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 17.

²²⁹ Ryan Andrew Newson, *Inhabiting the World: Identity, Politics, and Theology in Radical Baptist Perspective* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2018), 32.

²³⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 52.

language needs to be understood primarily in terms of what the speaker is doing in uttering it. That is why Austin's task was to examine the conditions for "felicitous" speech acts, the conditions that need to be fulfilled for all to be well with a given speech act, or, alternatively, to examine the sorts of flaws to which speech are prone.²³¹ Murphy also clarifies that Austin's odd choice of words—"felicitous" or "happy"—is due to the difficulty to find a better alternative to them. Since language is considered according to its use, an option could be to classify speech acts as "effective" or "ineffective," but this would suggest that it is not possible to succeed in asking someone, for example, to "close the door," without having succeeded in getting the person to comply. That condition would erase Austin's distinction between the "illocutionary act"—the speech act itself—from the "perlocutionary effects"—what happens as a contingent consequence of performing the speech act.²³² McClendon and Smith offer a description of Austin's conditions for a felicitous speech act, which Murphy recaps in the following way:

- (1) Preconditions—speaker and hearer must share a common language and be free from relevant impediments to communication.
- (2) Primary conditions—the speaker must issue a sentence in the common language that is a conventional way of performing that kind of speech act.
- (3) Representative or descriptive conditions—the sentence must bear a relation to a state of affairs that is appropriate to that sort of speech act.
- (4) Affective or psychological conditions—the speaker must intend to perform the speech act by means of the sentence and have the relevant attitudes or affects; the hearer must take the speaker to have the requisite intentions and affects (uptake).²³³

Using Austin's conditions for a felicitous speech act, McClendon and Smith present an example of a religious utterance, the specific utterance "G." G stands for "God led Israel across the Sea of Reeds," and in the example, the utterance is used by a contemporary Christian or

²³¹ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 114, f.n. 7.

²³² Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 114.

²³³ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 114–15; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 46–79.

Jewish teacher that they called “Aleph.” With the utterance of G, Aleph is confessing his faith in the past providence of God as he teaches a class. Therefore, the question is: “What has happened if Aleph’s utterance is properly to be classed a happy confession?”²³⁴ McClendon and Smith list the conditions for happily confessing in summary form:

1. *Preconditions.* The speaker and hearer share a common language and are free from relevant impediments to communication.
2. *Primary conditions*
 - 2.1 The speaker issues a sentence (performs a sentential act) in the common language.
 - 2.2 There is a convention of the language to the effect that this sentence is a way of (performing the speech-act of) confessing.
They explicate 2.2 as follows:
 - 2.21 In issuing this sentence the speaker takes up or maintains a certain stance, to which the speaker is thereby committed.
 - 2.22 In issuing this sentence, the speaker displays, i.e., witnesses to, this stance.
3. *Representative or descriptive conditions.* In issuing this sentence the speaker describes or represents the relevant state(s) of affairs with sufficient exactness to make it possible for the speaker to take up that stance (2.21) and to display it (2.22).
The relevant state(s) of affairs will vary from confession to confession. In the example, Aleph’s G requires:
 - 3.1 In a certain historical context, a certain event (being led across the Sea of Reeds) has occurred to a certain people (Israel).
 - 3.2 This event is attributable to the God acknowledged in this context.
 - 3.3 This God exists.
4. *Affective or psychological conditions*
 - 4.1 The speaker has a certain affect, namely, awed gratitude, and in issuing this sentence conveys his possession of it to the hearer.
 - 4.2 The speaker’s intention in issuing this sentence is to use the language’s convention for confessing (see 2.2), and he intends the hearer to understand (by his use) that he is so using it.
 - 4.3 The hearer on the basis of the issued sentence takes the speaker to have the requisite affect (see 4.1) and intentions (see 4.2), and he takes the speaker to have displayed or witnessed to the stance (see 2.22 and 3).²³⁵

In this example of confession, it is possible to appreciate how the representative condition—that is, the reference—is required for the fulfillment of the other conditions. According to them, in

²³⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 62.

²³⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 62–63.

Aleph's case, "the Israelites must as confessed have crossed that sea; this event must be placed within a wider stream of biblical narrative, here called the 'context' of the event. Also, God, the God to whom the context refers, must be God, must exist."²³⁶ For McClendon and Smith, the happiness of Aleph's confession on its representative side depends on these conditions and not merely on his belief in them. For example, if Aleph confessed that it was the Red Sea that Israel crossed—depending on an older Bible version with a wrong translation of the place where Israel crossed—his confession, as Aleph's community now knows, would have been unhappy, regardless of Aleph's sincerity. Sincerity is not a sufficient condition of happy confessing any more than of happy requesting.²³⁷ In other words, the representative conditions remind us that the primary condition—confessing and witnessing—together with the affective condition—awed gratitude—are not sufficient to make a confession happy.²³⁸ However, while holding that reference is important in a confession, stating in that way that valuations such as true and false do clearly apply to some religious utterances, McClendon's and Smith's method does not present a theory of representation.²³⁹ This lack of a theory of representation does not imply that they repudiate the "facts"—the referents as representation of the world "out there," independent of the observation of a person or community—but that they do not support the notion that convictional controversies could be solved just by stating or gathering more facts.²⁴⁰ As they state, "we certainly do not repudiate the descriptivist's concern with truth and falsity—we are as concerned as he or she to say what is true about the world. But if it turns out that the representative,

²³⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 66.

²³⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 66.

²³⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 74.

²³⁹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 77.

²⁴⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78.

primary, and affective elements of our utterances are intertwined as it seems to us they are, then saying what is true will sometimes truly be an elusive goal.”²⁴¹ Austin’s speech-act philosophy requires that a certain state of affairs shall prevail if the act is to be happy. However, as McClendon and Smith state, the demand is not a tyrannical one—there is some margin for error in representation in every speech-act where representation is involved. For example, in order to utter a happy confession of G, it does not matter whether “Israel” is five thousand or five million strong; nor does it matter how “transcendent” or “immanent” the God referred to in G may be, provided only that he can be identified as the God of the Israelite tradition in which G stands. What matters is the intimate interdependence of affective, representative, and primary conditions for happy utterance, the interconnection of language structure and persons and whatever else there is beyond both.²⁴²

Although McClendon and Smith consider that the representative condition—that is, the reference—is important, they are also aware of the diversity of experiences, ways of life, and beliefs in the world today, including a diversity of religious confessions.²⁴³ In this sense, the main question focuses on the possibility of claiming that some representative conditions are fulfilled within this pluralistic world. Ultimately, it is this pluralism that brings up difficulties for the notion of truth.²⁴⁴ Regarding this question, they reply,

we seem to have run directly into contested convictional ground. Here the relativist would have us back away, unable from any perspective other than Aleph’s to say what would count as satisfying these conditions, while the imperialist would perhaps say, let science (or philosophy, or common sense: in any case let my view) settle the matter, thus

²⁴¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78.

²⁴² McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 74.

²⁴³ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 76.

²⁴⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 66.

proposing, it seems to us, that we sail our inquiry right over the dry land in a miracle of transconvictional justification greater than the parting of the seas at the Exodus.²⁴⁵

What McClendon and Smith refer to “imperialist” is the position that states that with time, effort, and a specific method, it will be possible to reach an ultimate truth that will eliminate convictional differences. Behind this position, they say, there is the idea that the reason why people with different convictions do not understand one another and disagree with each other is that they are ignorant of some facts or incapable of thinking straight.²⁴⁶ However, for them, even the imperialist position must recognize today that it is just one position among many, due to the challenges that every community receives regarding its convictions from rival communities.²⁴⁷ At the same time that they reject this imperialist position, McClendon and Smith deem that there is no obligation to surrender to a complete relativism. The relativistic option that considers that persuasion and even communication among communities with different convictions is impossible because every convictional community would inhabit different worlds is not an option for them.²⁴⁸ For McClendon and Smith, relativism is not the only alternative to imperialism because it is possible to hold a third position. That is, perspectivism. This position assumes that although persons or communities with different convictions will experience, think, and speak about the world, their convictions, and their truths differently, it is ultimately possible to reach some sort of understanding and communication.²⁴⁹ McClendon and Smith’s perspectivism claims that there is no need to surrender to an “anything goes” mentality nor is it necessary to jettison truth, knowledge, or morality, abandoning religious convictions whatsoever.

²⁴⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 66.

²⁴⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 8.

²⁴⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 101.

²⁴⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 8–9.

²⁴⁹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 9.

Unlike other approaches, Austin’s speech-act philosophy includes a representative condition as part of successful or happy speech-acts. Language, including religious language, is not only a way of connecting members of a community with each other—including connecting to those past others who helped to create the linguistic community and those future others who are its heirs. Language connects the members of the community, its speakers, to the world, and that connection must be appropriate if the conventionally permitted speech-act with its successful affective conditions is to be happy.²⁵⁰

Contrary to a correspondence view of truth in a language theory of correspondence or representation, McClendon and Smith state that truth could be an empty concept because one person or community can understand truth as correspondence between statement and fact, but another may refer to truth to the coherence among statements, and even another could be more interested in the performative or in the pragmatic features of truth. These examples suggest that truth is broader than any one of these particular theories of truth claim.²⁵¹ As Murphy also states, “appropriate reference and appropriate expression are subordinate factors, in that use determines what counts as appropriate reference and appropriate affect.”²⁵² For McClendon and Smith, truth is not separable from other measures of value that are always present in the confession of the Christian convictions, Measures such as consistency, righteousness, justice, happiness, satisfaction, etc. In that case, the question about truth, which may seem exclusively as an epistemological question, is always obliged to reckon with the interdependence of ethical or aesthetic questions.²⁵³ However, according to McClendon and Smith, the fact that truth is

²⁵⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 77.

²⁵¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 155.

²⁵² Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 133.

²⁵³ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 16–17.

broader than the different particular perspectives is not an excuse to be free from the task of referring to the discoverable facts or adjusting our convictions themselves to the way things are. For them, if truth or falsity is ultimately considered irrelevant to the religious commitments, it will be difficult to insist on the importance of truth in less momentous questions.²⁵⁴

For McClendon and Smith, what anyone can felicitously or happily say is related to one's actions and to the way things are—the facts in the world. The reason for this interrelation is due to McClendon and Smith considering that speech itself is a kind of action, and this speech-act activity necessarily has some sort of representative force that connects it to the existing world. Hence, in order to understand a speech-act, it is necessary to understand the state of the speaker in his or her own situation or context.²⁵⁵ McClendon and Smith also consider that the convictions of a religious community or individual are related to one another in a variety of ways. Therefore, the justification of any religious conviction is not likely to be achieved without regarding its relation to other convictions embraced by the same faith community or the same believer. Hence, it is necessary to attend not only to particular convictions to justify them but also attend to other convictions that are a part of the wider set of convictions. Every conviction depends upon others and does not occur in isolation. Hence, it would be necessarily justified depending upon others.²⁵⁶ In other words, in order to know if a conviction is justifiable, it is necessary to fully understand its convictional speech-act. However, to fully understand a religious convictional utterance is only possible by paying attention to its wider frame, to the whole set of religious convictions in which is embedded.²⁵⁷ McClendon and Smith refer to the set of all convictions

²⁵⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 159.

²⁵⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 81.

²⁵⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 91.

²⁵⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78–79.

held by a person as that person's conviction set, and to the set of all convictions held in common by members of a community as the community's shared conviction set, meaning the set of beliefs that shape the actual life and practices of that community. They note that often the community's shared conviction set is guarded by the teachers, elders, or authoritative leaders of the community, and it is not possible for the community to relinquish these beliefs without being significantly changed.²⁵⁸

According to McClendon and Smith, one aspect of cultural pluralism is that individuals normally belong to many overlapping convictional communities. Therefore, the conviction set of a given person may include subsets shared with several communities. What usually happens is that the sometimes agreeing, sometimes conflicting convictions connected with these several communities are held by the individual hierarchically, one subset of convictions will tend to dominate that person's life, reducing the force of the other subset.²⁵⁹ However, some conviction sets may be much more elaborate than others, or they may be even more fragmentary and less connected between members. Hence, it is an empirical question to determine the actual sets of convictions displayed by communities and persons.²⁶⁰ By highlighting the interconnection between convictional sets, McClendon and Smith want to show that the question about the justification of convictions must attend both to the varied character of the convictions themselves and to the variety of relationships between convictions.²⁶¹ Going back to the example of Aleph uttering G, it is possible to say that McClendon and Smith's main point here is to notice that

while for analytic purposes it was necessary to consider the implications for Mr. Aleph of his single conviction, expressed in his single speech-act G treated in isolation, when it

²⁵⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 91.

²⁵⁹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 92.

²⁶⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 96.

²⁶¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 97.

comes to the assessment, the evaluation, of a particular life or style of life and the convictions that form its backbone, it would be a fruitless task to attempt to assess the worth of any conviction in isolation. The convictions in Aleph's set do not occur in isolation; they cannot (normally) be tested in isolation; thus they are not accepted or reformed or rejected in isolation. The justification or rejection of convictions, we see, must often consist in the justification or rejection of sets of convictions, of conviction sets, that will stand or fall in interdependence and not one by one.²⁶²

For McClendon and Smith, conviction sets are seldom deductive systems or theoretical constructs. Their unity is rather the unity of their coinherence in the organic unity of a community of persons. Hence, neither logical interdependence nor any other single explanatory feature will account for the occurrence of particular conviction sets. However, the notion that some convictions preside over others suggests for them that logic has a role to play in most conviction sets, but it may be associations of a contingent historical nature, or overt or subconscious emotive force, or combinations of these and other unnamed elements, that bind convictions together.²⁶³ According to McClendon and Smith, the glue that binds convictions into a single set is their mutual relation to the life of the person or the life of the community in which that person lives. That is, the unity of conviction sets is the rough but vital unity of shared life, the narrative in which they cohere.²⁶⁴

According to McClendon and Smith, conviction sets normally belong to communities, not individuals, due to the public and convention-governed nature of language and thought. It is possible to understand what Aleph meant by G because G arose within a community. It is the community that provides the context of a convictional utterance, and not only the religious community but the linguistic community as well. In order to form and express shared convictions, it is necessary to use one or more of the natural languages in common ways. In that

²⁶² McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 98–99.

²⁶³ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99.

²⁶⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99.

sense, linguistic communities are necessarily convictional communities as well.²⁶⁵ Even the private or rebellious convictions of members of the community can be understood because of their connection with the communal matrix from which they diverge or dissent. Therefore, in a convictional community, not all persons therein must have identical conviction sets, nor must any two personal sets be identical.²⁶⁶ In this respect, all convictions may be challenged, and each may be modified under pressure. That is, there are no irreversible convictions.²⁶⁷ As McClendon and Smith explain,

Aleph's own set need not, perhaps rarely will, be simply identical with the community's shared set. Even in his departures from the common store, however, the meaning and justification of his set are dependent upon the meaning of the common set. Since each of Aleph's convictions acquires part of its significance from all the other members of his set and since every member of his set depends for its understandability upon the language of the community, we cannot understand Aleph or justify his set of convictions save by reference to the community to which he belongs. If he participates in more than one community, then we shall have to consider each. The understanding and justification of Aleph's convictions, then, are dependent upon the understanding and ... the justifiability of the community's convictions. It is the community that is logically prior, however keen may be our interest in the individual and his or her personal faith.²⁶⁸

In McClendon's and Smith's view, the central problem of the justification of convictions has to do with the plurality of convictional communities. The reason for this problem, according to them, is that to judge a conviction from within a particular convictional border is a kind of self-judgment, while to judge a conviction across convictional borders seems either question-begging and presumptuous or logically questionable.²⁶⁹ In this respect, McClendon and Smith say that it is first necessary to acknowledge the nature of the convictions as *convictions*. In that

²⁶⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99–100.

²⁶⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 100.

²⁶⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 100.

²⁶⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 100–101.

²⁶⁹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 101.

sense, neither the “contemporary secular men [sic]” nor their religious counterparts could claim a position beyond a conviction. The philosopher of religion’s tale about the task of judging convictions from an impartial position regarding religion is no longer possible to endorse. Hence, it is important to recognize the issue around what constitutes a justification of a conviction is in itself a convictional matter.²⁷⁰ In this respect, quoting Paul van Buren, McClendon and Smith state that there is no alternative to “seeing things as.” The religious position of seeing the “ordinary” as “extraordinary,” as a cause of wonder, is no more and no less in need of justification than seeing the “ordinary” as “ordinary” and as something to be taken for granted—the position of the “contemporary secular men.”²⁷¹

According to McClendon and Smith, the difficulty in understanding a religious utterance and appraising its happiness lies in his convictional distance from other convictional communities.²⁷² They state that:

when a linguistic practice is one employed by everyone who speaks a language, there is relatively little difficulty in knowing what its conditions-for-happiness will be and in knowing to all intents and purposes what counts as the fulfillment of those conditions. One knows these things merely by knowing the language and culture in which the utterance is heard. For centuries many have confessed as Aleph confessed and have been understood and approved or challenged, the challenges directed mainly to the circumstances of each speaker, his or her fitness to utter those words, his or her being in position to utter that speech-act. But as a culture becomes more pluralistic, the status of the convictions conveyed in an utterance may shift from “generally accepted” to “disputed” or “accepted only within a subcommunity,” and then we have the sort of circumstance that makes the process of examination for happiness similar to that in Aleph’s case.²⁷³

²⁷⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 102.

²⁷¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 102.

²⁷² McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 104.

²⁷³ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 104–5.

Hence, the question is no longer about how the convictions of a community are justifiable—or how its speech-acts may be deemed felicitous—within that convictional community, but how in a pluralist world, a world in which one’s own convictional community is not alone but exists alongside others, are convictions justifiable and speech-acts happy.²⁷⁴ For McClendon and Smith, if conflicting subcommunities were members of a single overarching community, then the standards of the larger community, subscribed by both sides, might serve as a convictional court of appeal. But problems in this matter begin when a smaller community—or even one person—chooses to challenge the prevailing assumptions of the world community.²⁷⁵ Regarding this conundrum, they ask, “can we say that the convictions of the challenger must be justifiable in terms of the challenged convictions? Surely it is not self-evident that in every such case it is the challenger who is wrong.”²⁷⁶ This is not a hypothetical situation according to McClendon and Smith, since prophets, reformers, and revolutionary leaders have always been part of or hold the convictions of a minority.²⁷⁷ In this respect, simply to deny the necessity of adopting any conviction set is not a valid option, nor the option of holding limited, *ad hoc*, and provisional beliefs. Due to the nature of convictions, say McClendon and Smith, it is not possible to survive without any convictions.²⁷⁸ Even more, the very concept of a person requires convictions, since to be a person is to have the sort of persistence through time that convictions alone provide. Also, to lack all persistent and central beliefs is, simply put, to lack character.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 105.

²⁷⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 105.

²⁷⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 105.

²⁷⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 105.

²⁷⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 105.

²⁷⁹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 106.

In order to justify a set of convictions in a pluralist world, McClendon and Smith introduce three elements that must be considered in the justificatory procedure of convictions.²⁸⁰ In the first place, for McClendon and Smith, there are certain widely accepted considerations that go to establishing the adequacy of any belief. However, these accepted considerations to establishing the adequacy of any belief are already part of convictional communal criteria.²⁸¹ One may inquire, for example, whether one's convictions, so far as is relevant to them, are in fact true. Insofar as they are embraced by one community, one also may inquire whether convictions are mutually coherent. Or if in particular cases these tests are inapplicable or indecisive, one may still raise more pragmatic questions, such as, for example, does the conviction in question contribute to living a good life? Does it produce the most satisfactory life possible from the viewpoint of the owner(s) of the convictions under examination? Is the life that embodies these convictions a life of justice or righteousness?²⁸² Therefore, an appeal to these accepted considerations "cannot be employed to settle interconvictional disputes because they have been preempted to assert the disputed claims."²⁸³ As McClendon and Smith underscore:

The "justice" of Jesus may not be the same as the "justice" of Muhammad; the "truth" of Aristotle may not be equivalent to the "truth" of Moses. Even if such terms do in a given language have a common content, that content may not be sufficiently precise to allay convictional misunderstandings and conflicts. The process of examining any one of them, say the term "righteousness," across convictional lines is then a means of reintroducing the very pluralist dilemma we have just delineated.²⁸⁴

Nevertheless, for McClendon and Smith, although these widely accepted considerations are not themselves the ultimately judges to establishing the adequacy of any conviction, they are

²⁸⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 106.

²⁸¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 106–7.

²⁸² McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 106–7.

²⁸³ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 107.

²⁸⁴ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 107.

at least indicators of the jurisdictions under which convictional judgments are formed. That is, the *loci* of justification.²⁸⁵

In second place, for McClendon and Smith, “the understanding of convictions can be correlated with the understanding of speech-acts, and the justification of the convictions with the happiness of the speech-acts.”²⁸⁶ In other words, to fully understand a speaker is sometimes to be in a position to know whether his or her speech is justifiable. Hence, the analysis of a speech-act is then tantamount to the justification or rejection of that speech-act.²⁸⁷ For this, it is necessary to include the affective setting of speaker and hearers, together with the relationship between utterance and the wide world “outside” the speaker, and, even more, the primary relationship between the utterance and the linguistic-convictional community by means of which it is meaningful.²⁸⁸ The difficulty of this task lies in the fact that a convictional speaker’s speech, including some of its conditions for happiness, may be locked into that speaker’s conviction set, while in a pluralist world there are no means of transcending convictional barriers to reach transconvictional justification. Hence, since these barriers across it is not possible to know when convictional speech-acts are fully happy, it is impossible to fully understand speech acts from beyond such barriers.²⁸⁹ As an example, McClendon and Smith say: “To understand the language of mathematics, one must accept the conventions of mathematics; to understand the language of Buddhism one must [in some measure?] accept the commitments of Buddhism.”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 107.

²⁸⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 107.

²⁸⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 108.

²⁸⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 107–8.

²⁸⁹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 108.

²⁹⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 108.

The third element of the justificatory procedure for McClendon and Smith involves the recognition that the language of a community is never a hermetically sealed system or even static, but it is in a constant process of adjustment to external as well as internal pressure. Therefore, they state that the same must be true in the case of the community's formative convictions, for they can be expressed only in the language that is itself in flux.²⁹¹ For McClendon and Smith, a totally ossified community is a contradiction in terms: in a changing world, an unchanging community acquires a new environment and a new set of relations to the world. The recognition of these truisms leads them to ask whether there are not now ways in which it could be possible to change shared convictions in a common effort to survive in a changing world. This could provide a way of testing and even justifying specific convictions, or some of them, in a pluralist situation. Perhaps, they say, there are characteristic activities by means of which both single individuals and entire communities may be challenged to convictional shifts that succeed in meeting the challenges to justification that have arisen. These changes could reflect the social matrix of justification.²⁹²

III

James McClendon's Systematic Theology

According to McClendon, every theology has a community of reference, even if this is not explicitly acknowledged. In McClendon's case, the community of reference is the Anabaptist community, or how he calls it, the baptist community.²⁹³ Hence, McClendon's major work, his

²⁹¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 108.

²⁹² McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 109.

²⁹³ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, Doctrine (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 56.

Systematic Theology, which includes three different volumes on *Ethics*—published in 1986, *Doctrine*—published in 1994, and *Witness*—published in 2000, is written from and to this community of reference. For him, the so-called Radical Reformation originated a distinctive type of Christian community. That is, the *Wiedertäufer* or Anabaptists, who received that name after being accused of repeating their baptism illegitimately. These Anabaptist communities called themselves *Täufer* or brethren, but others have referred to them as the “Free Church”, the “Believers’ Church”, or even the “Left Wing” of the Reformation.²⁹⁴ McClendon simply refers to these communities as “baptists” because he considers that this term has more history in its favor. Regarding these baptist communities, he wants to emphasize their particular theological center, which he calls the “baptist vision.”²⁹⁵ McClendon says,

By such a vision, I do not mean some end result of theoretical reflection, remote from the daily life of a rather plain people. Nor do I mean a detachable baptist ideal—what baptists ought to be (but of course are not). Instead, by a vision I mean the guiding pattern by which a people (or as here, a combination of peoples) shape their thought and practice as that people or that combination; I mean by it the continually emerging theme and tonic structure of their common life.²⁹⁶

McClendon is aware that others have highlighted different marks for these baptist Christians, such as biblicism, liberty, discipleship, community, mission or evangelism.²⁹⁷ And although he considers that the role of Scripture is indeed a key mark for baptists, the term biblicism for him does not reflect how baptists use the Scriptures. Instead, McClendon offers the baptist vision as a distinctive theological mark for these baptist Christians, which propounds the idea that Scripture effects a link between the church of the apostles and the present baptist communities, and points to the “*shared awareness of the present Christian community as the*

²⁹⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:19.

²⁹⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:19.

²⁹⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:27.

²⁹⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:28.

primitive community and the eschatological community”.²⁹⁸ In a motto, says McClendon, the baptist vision claims that “the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day.”²⁹⁹ For him, the notion of a baptist vision is not a rejection of biblical studies in favor of naive biblicism but a justification for intense biblical study since the biblical story, according to this vision, has present relevance.³⁰⁰ The vision then endorses a positive biblicism, avoiding a dogmatic bibliolatry that usually exchanges participation in the Scriptures’ life for mere attention to the Bible as a book.³⁰¹ In the baptist vision, says McClendon, “the church now *is* the primitive church; *we* are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to *us*. And no rejoinder about the date of Jesus’ earthly ministry versus today’s date can refute that claim.”³⁰² For McClendon, the baptist vision is not merely a reading strategy by which the church can understand Scripture but Christian existence itself.³⁰³ In his view, the baptist vision entails a hermeneutical key to church and Bible because is the way the Bible is read by those who

(1) accept the plain sense of Scripture as its dominant sense and recognize their continuity with the story it tells, and who (2) acknowledge that finding the point of that story leads them to its application, and who also (3) see past and present and future linked by a “this is that” and “then is now” vision, a trope of mystical identity binding the story now to the story then, and the story then and now to God’s future yet to come.³⁰⁴

Hence, according to McClendon, God the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures continues to constitute the inner life of the church, so that the Bible and the church compose one story and

²⁹⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:30.

²⁹⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:30.

³⁰⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:31.

³⁰¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:31.

³⁰² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:32.

³⁰³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:33.

³⁰⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:45.

one reality. Consequently, there is a strong link between the plain sense of Scripture and the church's self-understanding as a continuation of the biblical story.³⁰⁵ McClendon also notes that

the vision allows a variety of Bible readings, a variety of applications, depending on time and place and on the individuality of the readers of Scripture in each time and place. Yet [...] the unity that arises by use of the vision is nevertheless sufficient to define an authentic style of communal Christian life, so that participants in such a community can know what the church must teach to be the church.³⁰⁶

The baptist vision is for McClendon the organizing principle around which an authentic baptist theology can take shape because it adequately incorporates the other marks of the baptist Christians—biblicism, liberty, discipleship, community, mission or evangelism—and, at the same time, it is sufficiently encompassing and distinctive to enable an interpretation of the baptist practices.³⁰⁷ Theology, for McClendon, is the science of convictions.³⁰⁸ That is, theology is “the discovery, understanding or interpretation, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.”³⁰⁹ In that sense, what he presents in his *Systematic Theology* is theology “understood as the theoretic of baptist common convictions, the web in which they adhere and breathe together.”³¹⁰ The baptist vision organizes the convictions of the present sharers of the vision, the baptist communities, as well as the narrative life in which these convictions are embedded.³¹¹ However, the theological task is not complete when the convictions of the sharers of the baptist vision are merely discovered or interpreted, for theology, according

³⁰⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:44.

³⁰⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:46.

³⁰⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:27, 33.

³⁰⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

³⁰⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23.

³¹⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

³¹¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:33.

to McClendon's definition, also confronts today's church, including the baptist communities, with a proposal to revise and transform its convictions.³¹² That is, theology is also "a mirror which asks the church if here it recognizes itself not as it is but as it must be to be faithful to Jesus Christ. Theology is a quest that properly culminates in such a question."³¹³ In this element of transformation it is possible to perceive that, for McClendon, theology is also creative and not only a descriptive task. Theology proposes a normative vision for the church.³¹⁴

Although McClendon refers to theology as a "science" of convictions, he also states that perhaps it is less misleading to speak of theology as a "discipline", since each discipline displays a rationality appropriate to its own area.³¹⁵ In this respect, theology for McClendon is a rational discipline, and because of that, it is in connection and interdependence with other rational disciplines, such as the social sciences, the humanities, and philosophy, for example. However, for him, this rational aspect of theology does not imply that theology requires a philosophical basis, purported to be a more certain foundation than theological certainty itself.³¹⁶ Happily, he says, "philosophers are recognizing that they can provide no such foundation."³¹⁷ Also, McClendon's notion of theology does not favor the subjective pole of theology, represented in his definition by the term "convictions," at the expense of the objective pole, represented by "whatever else there is," or vice versa. His notion of theology does not restrict the implied

³¹² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:34.

³¹³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:34.

³¹⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23.

³¹⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:38.

³¹⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:38.

³¹⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:38.

subject and implied object of theology in a way that would exclude by definition any main contemporary approaches to theology.³¹⁸

In McClendon's notion of theology as a science of convictions, the term "conviction" points to commitment and persuasion. Convictions, for him, are the beliefs that people and communities embody with some reason that guide all their thoughts and shape their lives.³¹⁹ At this point, McClendon brings in the definition of a conviction that he provided in his previous work *Convictions*. That is, a conviction is "a persistent belief such that if X (a person or a community) has a conviction, it will not be easily abandoned, and it cannot be abandoned without making X a significantly different person or community than before."³²⁰ Convictions for McClendon are commonly shared, held by communities that are formed by them just as individuals are formed by these convictions as well.³²¹ They are evident not only in professions of belief or disbelief but in all the attitudes and actions of a person or community. They have an affective dimension, but in contrast to mere emotion, they also have cognitive content. Also, in contrast to mere habits, convictions entail intentions and not only action, involving argument and persuasion and engaging the will of the convinced community and individual. However, a person or community may not always be aware of the actual convictions that they hold.³²²

McClendon indicates that the loss or neglect of Christian convictions will seriously impair, even defeat, the very existence of a church, hence the importance of the theological task.³²³ For him, the convictions that make the church's life possible fall into three broad and

³¹⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23.

³¹⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:22.

³²⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:22–23; McClendon, Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 5, 81–91.

³²¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23.

³²² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:29.

³²³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

overlapping categories: the moral convictions that inform Christian living, the doctrinal convictions that display the substance of Christian faith, and the philosophical convictions that open out into a Christian vision or worldview.³²⁴ Therefore, life, faith, and vision are not three realities for McClendon but one; what is done cannot be separated from what is taught or from what is envisioned. That is why McClendon's three systematic volumes—*Ethics, Doctrine, Witness*—constitute three levels of inquiry but one single “life-faith-vision,” one whole.³²⁵ And this is the reason why the church teaches its convictions in many modes. That is,

by the visible lives of members as well as by the preached word, by the welcome it extends (or does not extend) to human beings in all their racial, cultural, sexual variety as well as by the hymns it sings and the door-to-door witness it bears, by the presence it affords the defeated and despairing as well as by the generosity it extends to the down-and-out—and not least by the classroom instruction of members and inquirers young and old. In these ways and others the church teaches.³²⁶

The practice of teaching the church's convictions is what McClendon calls doctrine. Therefore, doctrine is the practice of teaching the church's shared convictions that constitute its communal existence.³²⁷ Hence, doctrines for McClendon are what the church must teach if the church is to be the church here and now, and that is the reason why the doctrinal task—the practice of teaching in the church—has priority over the theological task.³²⁸ He says that

doctrine is not manufactured by theologians to be marketed by churches or pastors. It is the church that must (and does!) ask questions and seek answers. So doctrine (the church teaching) is the first-order task; doctrinal theology is necessarily second-order. Understood as shared convictions, doctrine constitutes communal existence. It cannot be interrupted even for a generation without corrosive loss.³²⁹

³²⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:21.

³²⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:21.

³²⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:23.

³²⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

³²⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:23.

³²⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

Hence, theology undertakes the critical examination of the practice of teaching doctrine, and assigns this task to doctrinal theology.³³⁰

A “practice” for McClendon is a complex series of human actions involving definite practitioners who by certain means and in accordance with certain rules seek an intended end.³³¹ As an example, McClendon states that “just as ‘medicine’ denotes not merely bottles on a pharmacy shelf but a *practice*, and ‘law’ no merely statutes, but *another* kind of practice, our practice of doctrine is far more than individual doctrines involved.”³³² For him, “there is no ‘thing taught’ without *teaching*; no Christian doctrines apart from the practice of doctrine.”³³³ As the church being itself a teacher in a broad sense, each member is also a teacher according to McClendon, although few are formally designated teachers in the church. However, insofar as the practice of teaching requires learners, everyone in the church is involved in this practice.³³⁴ Since the means employed for the practice of doctrine include explicit doctrines, McClendon claims that

we must grant the cognitive, referential role of convictions about creation, atonement, Christ, and church, for example, yet such doctrines are not the only or even the chief means of doctrinal teaching, which far more often employs narrative and parable, paradigmatic example, searching question (“who, then, was a neighbor to him”), and striking precept (“sell all you have and give to the poor”) in doing its work.³³⁵

McClendon clarifies that just like throwing a ball is not the same as playing baseball, not everyone who utters belief-claims is a Christian teacher. Teaching is a practice, and every practice has a context of rules. Due to the most important Christian doctrines being usually not

³³⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

³³¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:28.

³³² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:29.

³³³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:29.

³³⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:29.

³³⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:30.

explicitly cited but presupposed and exemplified in the church, he states in accordance with Lindbeck that all Christian doctrines are like grammatical rules governing Christian discourse. That is, rules that show what can and cannot be meaningfully declared in Christian teaching.³³⁶ At this point, McClendon addresses the critique to Lindbeck that I mentioned in the previous chapter regarding the problem of reference. Lindbeck's understanding of doctrine as grammatical rules, says McClendon, seems to cut Christian doctrine off from reality claims because it is not clear that it refers to extra-linguistic or extra-Christian reality. However, following Bruce Marshal, McClendon states that there is a less extreme way to read Lindbeck's proposals. He considers that Lindbeck is not necessarily denying that Christian doctrines refer to an extra-linguistic or extra-Christian referent, such as God above and the world outside, but only highlighting that what Christians say about God and world cannot be meaningfully separated from the network of rules and meanings that constitute Christian teaching and judged apart from it.³³⁷ For McClendon, Christian teaching makes sense in terms of its rules and not apart from them, but, at the same time, it is not merely its rules any more than any other practice is merely a set of rules.³³⁸ As he says, "in Christian teaching as in other practices to know the rules is necessary, but to play the game is something more."³³⁹ Finally, in McClendon's view, the end or goal of the practice of teaching doctrine is for all Christians to "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."³⁴⁰

³³⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:30–31.

³³⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:31.

³³⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:31.

³³⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:31.

³⁴⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:32. Eph. 4:13 NRSV.

Since theology for McClendon is a science of convictions, and since human convictions differ as much as people do, McClendon considers that a contextual pluralism is necessary for the theological task. Our theologies must represent us as we are, he says, as well as representing God as God.³⁴¹ McClendon states, “God, having created the varieties we human beings comprise, *wants* us to theologize in varied ways.”³⁴² There are two reasons why this does not introduce a laissez-faire subjectivism into theology according to McClendon. First, because Christian theology is always the theology of a community addressing the gospel in a particular place and time. Second, because theology is the very means by which those in one context encounter those in others for mutual witness and critical correction.³⁴³ In that sense, McClendon acknowledges the geographical, cultural, and political character of every theological context, and he is also aware of his own context, the North American one, although the questions about what is this North American context and how it affects theology are lingering questions for him.³⁴⁴ However, McClendon explicitly states that his construal of the context of doctrine is in contrast to ideologies such as Marxism, liberalism, feminism, the political right, etc., that, according to him, place some political, economic, or social proposal prior to the gospel. He thinks that those ideologies propose singular cures for what they think ails the world, but what McClendon wants is to acknowledge such contextual ills without defining a remedial program only on their basis. In that sense, he differs from libertarian, ethnic-racial, and gender-based theologies or ideologies as well because, in their preoccupation with context, they risk overlooking the content of Christian teaching and they fail to see that an authentic practice of Christian doctrine grows from

³⁴¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

³⁴² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

³⁴³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

³⁴⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:50.

the gospel, not from ideological assumptions, however insightful they are.³⁴⁵ In this respect, McClendon says, “their position is unstable, wavering between pure ideology and authentic Christian theology.”³⁴⁶

According to McClendon, it has been difficult for theology to relate the emphasis on the Bible and the emphasis on religious experience without diminishing one or the other. However, he considers that the recovery of the primacy of narrative in theology could show more clearly how experience and Bible can be related to one another without making a philosophical foundation of either. In that sense, in McClendon’s view, the narrative dimension of theology is a necessity.³⁴⁷ For him, neither the Catholic stance of treating the Bible as the source of received dogmas, nor the Protestant alternative by which the Bible was considered evidence of the truth, are adequate. He argues that the Bible is the book of a story that claims to be the believers’ real story. Hence, he wants to bring the idea of religious experience under narrative.³⁴⁸ In this regard, he says that

“experience” is a systematically ambiguous word, referring sometimes to evanescent, private, inward feeling; sometimes to matters of communal and public knowledge. If, however, we see that the experience that matters for Christian life is not mere flashes of feeling but is *what we have lived through* and lived out in company with one another, constituting our ongoing share in the Christ story, then the confusion may dissolve. Experience in this sense is the enduring or timely aspect of our lives in relation to God and one another; as plot and character in some setting, it is the stuff of—narrative.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:53.

³⁴⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:53.

³⁴⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:36.

³⁴⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:37.

³⁴⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:37.

In this respect, says McClendon, every theology is inevitably linked to some narrative, and successful theologies must know this and try to discover and reclaim their proper narrative base.³⁵⁰

In McClendon's view, theology's rationality is also evident in the control of its own internal organization. In this respect, he highlights the creative dimensions of theology, offering a parallel example taken from mathematics. He says that as the transformation of an equation leaves everything the same, yet creates possibilities the original formula had not conveyed. Theology, in a similar way, receives the Christian heritage and transforms it, creating new possibilities for reclaiming inherited convictions.³⁵¹ In this theological task, he says, "the models come not only from those philosophical and aesthetic forms that imagination may invoke but also from the life of the theologian-in-community and the theologian-in-dialogue."³⁵² Regarding this transformative characteristic of the theological task, it is important to highlight that McClendon's emphasis on the baptist vision changes the traditional theological order of a systematic theology. As Curtis Freeman says, in McClendon's work, Christian life goes before Christian faith, ethics goes before doctrine, and convictions go before reasons.³⁵³ This is why, in McClendon's systematic theology, ethics stands first.³⁵⁴ As McClendon mentions, systematic theology has often been treated in three parts: apologetics—also called prolegomena, philosophical theology, fundamental theology, or foundations—Christian doctrine—also called dogmatics or misleadingly taken to be "theology proper"—and Christian ethics—also called

³⁵⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:37.

³⁵¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:38.

³⁵² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:38.

³⁵³ Freeman, "Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists," McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:xiii.

³⁵⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:39.

moral theology or theological ethics.³⁵⁵ It is usually assumed that these three systematic parts should be presented in that order, with an apologetic prologue providing the grounding or basis for the whole system, doctrine showing what must be believed and taught, and finally, ethics, which is focused on discovering the conduct or decisions that are said to flow from doctrines. Therefore, the suggestion is that apologetics-dogma-ethics is somehow the logical order in theology.³⁵⁶ Contrary to this order, McClendon argues that no part of systematic theology stands independent, since each presupposes the other. Against the traditional systematic order, McClendon states that philosophy is no longer the ultimate intellectual umpire, telling ethics and religion what can and cannot be accepted. Also, when the study of systematic theology is understood as preparation for ministry, says McClendon, there is little reason to initiate students into it via that part of systematic theology most abstruse, most remote from daily life, and least congenial, namely, its philosophical appendages.³⁵⁷ McClendon also clarifies that, for him, the reason to begin with ethics is due to a pedagogical priority, not a logical one. He does not want to reduce all theology to ethics.³⁵⁸ For him, all three layers of systematic theology—apologetics, doctrine, and ethics—have the same subject, the convictions of the community in relation to the triune God and to all else. Likewise, all have the same object or goal, to provide a faithful yet transformative account of those convictions that can cohere in a living church. Hence, says McClendon, all parts of the system have a common task and they properly constitute one theology. However, there is a difference in the insight each requires.³⁵⁹ McClendon's systematic

³⁵⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:39.

³⁵⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:40.

³⁵⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:40.

³⁵⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:41.

³⁵⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:43.

theology begins with ethics. That is, stating the shape of the common life in the body of Christ and asking how the church must live to be truly the church. He then goes to the investigation of the common teaching that supports that life. Therefore, McClendon's question is also doctrinal; he asks what the church must teach to be truly the church. Finally, he claims that it is necessary to discover the church's stance to the world in order to be truly the church. That is, its witness, which is somehow related to modern apologetics.³⁶⁰

After this overview of McClendon's work, I consider that in McClendon's theology it is possible to discern not only a specific theological method that is postliberal, and in that sense, postfoundationalist, but it is also possible to perceive that method as a response to the problem of reference in postliberal theology. In this respect, McClendon's method can provide an avenue to overcome the epistemological crisis regarding the confirmation of theological claims that does not need to resort to a modern foundationalist perspective, such as the proposals of liberal, fundamentalist, and conservative theologies. Hence, the next chapter will focus on a presentation of McClendon's theological method as a valuable alternative to solve the problem of reference in postliberal theology.

³⁶⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:43.

Chapter 3

James McClendon's Theological Method as a Postfoundationalist Response to the Epistemological Crisis over Theological Language

As I presented in the first chapter, postliberal theology is charged with denying any valid notion of truth and promoting religious relativism by reducing every theological claim to an intrasystemic profession of faith. The major reason for this negative view is that postliberal theologians reject the descriptivist theory of language that other theologians assume, which seems to eliminate the importance of reference to determine meaning and truth in theological language. For postliberal theology, meaning is constituted by the community usage of the biblical narrative, a notion of meaning that functions as an alternative to the notion of a descriptivist theory of language. In this respect, for postliberal theologians, the meaning of the biblical text is not necessarily connected to an external referent outside the biblical narrative, hence the problem of reference in postliberal theology. However, not just some of its critics but also a few proponents of postliberal theology consider that a theory of reference is imperative for postliberal theology to meet the demand for confirmation of its theological claims, and although Frei and Lindbeck have clearly shown that the rejection of a descriptivist or referential theory of language does not entail discarding reference altogether, their responses to the problem of reference seem not to be sufficient. Hence, addressing the problem of reference, without holding a theory of reference, and, therefore, without succumbing to the logic of a foundationalist epistemology, seems to be a current and persistent problem in postliberal theology. In this respect, this chapter aims to offer McClendon's theological method as an alternative for this postliberal predicament.³⁶¹

³⁶¹ McClendon mentions that a "theory" could be understood as an overview that adequately organizes an entire topic, or, as he also says, "a string long enough to tie up all the facts." McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*,

Based on the overview of McClendon's work that I offered in the previous chapter, in this chapter I aim to show that in McClendon's theology it is possible to discern not only a postliberal theological method but also a response to the problem of reference in postliberal theology. In this respect, McClendon's theology provides an avenue to overcome the epistemological crisis regarding the confirmation of theological claims without needing to resort to a modern foundationalism and without falling into a relativistic non-foundationalism. Therefore, in the first section of this chapter, I will describe McClendon's theological method following the overview of his work presented in the previous chapter, showing, at the same time, how McClendon's method responds to the problem of reference in postliberal theology. Then I will discuss the problem with a foundationalist and a non-foundationalist epistemology in theology in the second section, in order to present McClendon's theological method as a postfoundationalist option in the third section, as a viable alternative to overcome the epistemological crisis regarding theological language.

I

James McClendon's Theological Method as a Response to the Problem of Reference

As I presented in the previous chapter, McClendon understands theology as the science of convictions.³⁶² That is, he understands it as a discipline of study similar to other sciences that displays a specific rationality appropriate to its own area of knowledge. For him, theology is the rational study of the convictions of the Christian community, and theology's goal is to discover

2:213. The perspective on McClendon regarding the place for reference in theological claims that I develop in this work suggests that McClendon's proposal does not entail the creation of a theory, but involves many different strings and the relations among them. In this sense, this work does not address the question about considering Austin's speech act philosophy of language as a theory nor the specific question about different "theories of reference" on philosophy of language.

³⁶² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

these convictions, interpret them, and critique them, in light of other disciplines and in relation to “whatever else there is” in the world.³⁶³ For him, theology must aim to creatively transform the Christian communal convictions into better ones.³⁶⁴ Although McClendon never describes his theological method explicitly as such, I consider that it is implicit in his understanding of the theological task and in the theology that he developed in his work.³⁶⁵ In this section, I aim to make McClendon’s theological method explicit, indicating, at the same time, how it responds to the problem of reference in postliberal theology.

As I already stated, theology for McClendon is a discipline that aims to discover, interpret, critique, and transform the convictions of the church.³⁶⁶ Convictions, in McClendon’s thought, are the beliefs that all people and communities embody that guide and shape their lives. Therefore, the convictions of the church are the beliefs that particular Christians, and the Christian community as a whole, embody or live out, which are revealed in the actions of the Christian individual and the Christian community.³⁶⁷ In order to be considered as convictions, these actions must entail intention, and because of that, they are not mere habits but include an affective dimension as well as a cognitive one.³⁶⁸ Hence, for McClendon, the life of the church, the actions that the church does, are the fleshing out of the church’s convictions. In this respect, although the convictions that the church holds could be classified in moral, doctrinal, and philosophical convictions—that is, related to Christian living, faith, and vision—they are not

³⁶³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23, 38; McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

³⁶⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:34; McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

³⁶⁵ It is possible to take the first and last chapters of *Ethics* and *Doctrine* to be statements of McClendon’s method, but he never explicitly states that. Also, McClendon scatters methodological reflection across many different writings, as I showed, and tried to tie those methodological notions, in Chapter 2.

³⁶⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23.

³⁶⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:22–23.

³⁶⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:29.

three different convictional realities but one. Hence, they form a single “life-faith-vision” convictional whole.³⁶⁹ McClendon recognizes that it is possible to establish three different levels of theological inquiry—moral, doctrinal, and philosophical—when it comes to studying Christian convictions, but ultimately, what Christians do cannot be separated from what they teach and the life that they envision due to their convictions.³⁷⁰

Although McClendon’s *Systematic Theology* addresses in different volumes the moral, doctrinal, and philosophical convictions of the church—*Ethics, Doctrine, Witness*—his method, his way of doing theology, integrates all of these theological areas. For him, no part of the theological system can stand independently, each presupposes the other and all have the same subject—the convictions of the Christian community in relation to the triune God and to all else—and the same goal—to provide a faithful yet transformative account of those convictions that can cohere in a living church.³⁷¹ However, since the theological task for McClendon is to discover, interpret, and transform the embodied Christian convictions, it is somehow logical that McClendon’s theology begins with the actual Christian life.³⁷² In this respect, not only the first volume of McClendon’s systematic—*Ethics*—starts engaging the actual Christian life theologically, but McClendon’s first theological work—*Biography as Theology*—focused on the Christian life, on biography as a form of theological inquiry.

In *Biography as Theology*, McClendon explores the lives of some notable Christians—the “saints”—in order to identify a specific theology in the images and narratives that guide their lives and that make them who they are. That is, the images and narratives that revealed their

³⁶⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:21.

³⁷⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:39.

³⁷¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:40.

³⁷² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:39.

convictions. In this respect, McClendon's theological method posits biography as a form of theology because it displays the Christian convictions not only of the particular "saints" that he presents but the convictions of the Christian communities to which they belong.³⁷³ For this reason, McClendon states that theology could also be seen as an investigation of Christian communal character, the character-in-community.³⁷⁴ Therefore, since in McClendon's view there is no real separation between theology and biography, his theological method includes biography even in his *Systematic Theology*, and not only in *Ethics*, where McClendon investigates the shape of the common life in the body of Christ and asks how the church must live to be truly the church.³⁷⁵ Biographical theology is also present in the second volume of McClendon's systematic—*Doctrine*—where the focus is on doctrinal theology, and in the third volume—*Witness*—that concentrates on the witness of the church to the world.³⁷⁶ McClendon's theological method shows that theology for him is a second-order task, where the first-order task is the practice of the church, the way Christians embody their convictions.³⁷⁷

Although McClendon's theological emphasis rests on the actual Christian life, he also considers that theology should not be reduced to biography or ethics. His theological method begins with the actual life of the Christian community, but, for him, there is also a difference in the insights that each traditional part of a systematic theology underscores of that life, which makes it possible to distinguish between the moral convictions of the church, the doctrinal convictions of the church, and the convictions that the church witnesses to the world.

³⁷³ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 22.

³⁷⁴ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 21–22, 69.

³⁷⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:43.

³⁷⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:53-55, 94-96. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 227-270.

³⁷⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

McClendon's theological method goes from the actual Christian life to an investigation of the common teaching that supports that life. That is, from the Christian life to doctrine, to what the church must teach to be truly the church. However, as I highlighted already and as I will show here, McClendon's notion of doctrine does not make a real distinction between the teaching of the church and the life of the church, as if these two realms are separated, to the point that the teaching of the church is also a practice of the church, the practice of doctrine.³⁷⁸

In McClendon's theology, there seems to be a distinction between three different notions of doctrine. The first notion of doctrine in McClendon's work understands doctrine as the practice of teaching the church's convictions. This notion has priority over the other two notions because of McClendon's emphasis on the actual life of the Christian community. The church's practice of doctrine means the practice of teaching the church's communal existence, the practice of teaching how the church must live to be truly the church.³⁷⁹ The second notion of doctrine in McClendon's work is what he refers to "explicit doctrines," which are one of the many means by which the church practices the teaching of its convictions. These explicit doctrines are the shared convictions about creation, atonement, Christ, church, etc., that are controlling *motifs* in the Christian life and which are revealed in what Christians say and do.³⁸⁰ The third notion of doctrine in McClendon's work is what he calls doctrinal theology, the critical examination of the church's practice of teaching doctrine. That is, the academic investigation of the common teaching that supports the church's life.³⁸¹ Hence, for McClendon, the church's practice of doctrine is more than the individual doctrines involved in that practice. The means employed for

³⁷⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:21–23; McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:41–43.

³⁷⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:23–24.

³⁸⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:30.

³⁸¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

the practice of doctrine include explicit doctrines, which have a cognitive and referential role, yet such doctrines are not the only or even the chief means of doctrinal teaching. For McClendon, all the common life of the church teaches the Christian way of life, and often the church does not employ explicit doctrines to teach doctrine but narrative, parable, paradigmatic examples, searching questions, and striking precepts are the main form of teaching. In that sense, the most important Christian doctrines are usually not explicitly cited but presupposed and exemplified in the church. However, explicit doctrines do have a place in the teaching of the church. Following Lindbeck, McClendon states that doctrines work as grammatical rules governing Christian discourse—that is, as rules that show what can and cannot be meaningfully declared in Christian teaching. For McClendon, Christian teaching makes sense in terms of its rules and not apart from them, but, at the same time, it is not merely its rules any more than any other practice is merely a set of rules. In the practice of doctrine as Christian teaching, to know the explicit doctrines that rule the Christian life is necessary, but to play the game, to practice the teaching of the communal form of life, and live the actual Christian way of life, is more than just to learn the rules.³⁸²

Doctrinal theology, as an investigation of the common teaching that supports the life of the church, is part of McClendon's theological method because the teachings of the church are not just a *motif* embodied but also a *motif* that can be spelled out in the form of propositions, which form the explicit Christian doctrines, and these doctrines need to be discovered, interpreted, and criticized.³⁸³ Therefore, although McClendon's theology establishes the Christian life under communal convictions as the starting point for the theological endeavor, his

³⁸² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:29–31.

³⁸³ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 79–80.

theological method includes an investigation of propositional theological statements.³⁸⁴

However, in McClendon's method, these propositional doctrinal statements are in continual and intimate contact with the lived experience which doctrinal theology collects, orders, and informs. Without such living contact, doctrines and doctrinal theology become remote from the actual Christian life and, therefore, doctrinal statements become empty propositions. In this regard, there is a place in McClendon's theological method for doctrines as a form of specific linguistic action that reveal the convictions of the church. The fact that Christian convictions can be expressed in sentences with a subject and a predicate means that certain aspects of the general structure of language can provide a way to understand the structure of these convictions. In this respect, it is possible to use intellectual tools to analyze language to discover the character of a particular person or community shaped by a particular doctrinal conviction. By attending to the uttered convictions of the Christian community, it is possible not only to learn which convictions govern particular Christians and particular communities, but also to discover which ones are theologically justified, and therefore, to critique and transform these Christian communal convictions into better ones. Hence, for McClendon, it is now possible to be involved in argument and persuasion when it comes to discussing Christian convictions. That is, it is possible to do doctrinal theology.³⁸⁵

In McClendon's theological method, Austin's speech-act philosophy of language is the tool that helps to analyze, understand, justify, or reject a specific religious convictional language. McClendon focuses on Austin's three "acts" in and around speech in order to understand how language works. That is, to understand what religious convictional language is and does. As I

³⁸⁴ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 149, 163–64.

³⁸⁵ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 22, 164.

mentioned in the previous chapter, these three acts are: (1) the physical act of utterance called the *sentential* act; (2) an utterance's *illocutionary* force—meaning the way it finds its place in a social context recognized as appropriate and in a way that it is able to perform; and (3) its *perlocutionary* force—meaning the affective force, the fact that other persons or state of affairs are affected by the speech act.³⁸⁶ McClendon's main point by focusing on Austin's three "acts" of speech is to show that saying something is a way of acting meaningfully, highlight the crucial significance of the speech-act—Austin's illocutionary act—rather than the sentential act or the perlocutionary act.³⁸⁷ Hence, uttered doctrinal confessions need to be understood primarily in terms of what a Christian, or the Christian community in general, is doing by uttering its convictions. As I also mentioned in the previous chapter, for these doctrines or confessions to do what they are supposed to do as speech acts, for all to go well or be "felicitous," certain conditions need to be fulfilled.³⁸⁸ These conditions are divided into: (1) preconditions—speaker and hearer must share a common language and be free from relevant impediments to communication; (2) primary conditions—the speaker must issue a sentence in the common language that is a conventional way of performing that kind of speech act; (3) representative or descriptive conditions—the sentence must bear a relation to a state of affairs that is appropriate to that sort of speech act; and (4) affective or psychological conditions—the speaker must intend to perform the speech act by means of the sentence and have the relevant attitudes or affects. That is, the hearer must take the speaker to have the requisite intentions and affects (uptake).³⁸⁹ In these conditions for "felicitous" speech acts, it is possible to see how the representative

³⁸⁶ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 32.

³⁸⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 52.

³⁸⁸ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 114, f.n. 7.

³⁸⁹ Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 114–15; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 46–79.

condition—that is, the reference—is also required in a doctrinal confession. In other words, confession is a speech-act activity that necessarily has some sort of representative force that connects it to the existing world.³⁹⁰

In McClendon's thought, full understanding of a convictional speech-act is only possible by paying attention to the whole set of religious convictions in which that speech-act is embedded. That is, it is necessary to pay attention to the connections between a convictional speech act and other convictional speeches or embodied convictions by the same faith community or the same believer.³⁹¹ For McClendon, conviction sets are not deductive systems or theoretical constructs, they are an organic unity that a community holds and makes coherent. Hence, what binds convictions together as a coherent set are the associations of contingent historical nature, the overt or subconscious emotive force, or combinations of these and other unnamed elements. That is, unity in a convictional set is due to the interconnected relations in the life of the person or the life of the community in which the person or community that utters that confession lives. Hence, McClendon's theological method proposes to pay attention to the convictional set, the vital unity of the Christian shared life in which the Christian doctrinal confessions cohere.³⁹²

In McClendon's theology, the unity of a convictional set is given by the baptist community of reference, which holds a shared narrative provided by the baptist vision. This vision that shapes baptist thought and practice is the shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community, where the Scripture

³⁹⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 81.

³⁹¹ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78–79, 91.

³⁹² McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99.

provides the link between the past, present, and future of the Christian community.³⁹³ The baptist vision organizes the convictions of the present sharers of the vision, the baptist communities, as well as the narrative life in which these convictions are imbedded.³⁹⁴ In this respect, the whole set of religious convictions for baptist Christians includes the convictions present in the Scripture as the church's narrative, but also the convictions formed in the connection between those biblical narratives and the present narratives that are continually being formed in the Christian community. In other words, the present lives and confessions of baptist communities are also part of baptist religious convictions. Hence, the notion of a baptist vision gives a present relevance to the biblical narrative and endorses a positive biblicism that highlights the church's participation in the Scriptures' life.³⁹⁵ In that respect, in McClendon's theological method, the Bible and the church compose one story and one reality.³⁹⁶ What McClendon presents in his *Systematic Theology*, by following this specific theological method, is theology "understood as the theoretic of baptist common convictions, the web in which they adhere and breathe together."³⁹⁷ However, McClendon's theological method is not complete when the convictions of the sharers of the baptist vision are merely discovered or interpreted. Theology also must confront today's baptist communities with a proposal to revise and transform their convictions.³⁹⁸ McClendon's theological method is a quest to find a normative vision for the baptist communities, which is a creative and transformative task.³⁹⁹

³⁹³ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:56; McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:19–30.

³⁹⁴ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:33.

³⁹⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:31.

³⁹⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:44.

³⁹⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

³⁹⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:34.

³⁹⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23, 34.

Since McClendon's theological method pays attention to the whole set of religious convictions on which the confessional speech-act of baptist communities is embedded, it is possible to perceive that his whole theological method rests on postliberal assumptions. For McClendon, the convictional set that is part of the baptist communities promotes a distinct form of intratextuality, redescribing reality within the scriptural framework of the baptist vision rather than translating the baptist set of convictions into extrascriptural categories. This convictional set also emphasizes the peculiar grammar of Christian baptist communities, concentrating on its scriptural logic and the regulative role of doctrine within that logic. In this respect, McClendon's theological method assumes its own rational coherence, which also exhibits itself more in terms of good performance and competent execution than by conformity to independently formulated criteria, making it a truly postliberal theological method. However, contrary to Lindbeck's and Frei's postliberal theologies, McClendon's method is explicit about the role of reference in confessional doctrines. For him, the coherence of the baptist convictional set, in connection to the intratextuality that it presents and with the intentions and affects of the speakers of that convictional set, is not enough if there is no relation to a state of affairs appropriate to that sort of speech act. The primary condition—confessing or witnessing to a doctrine—together with the affective condition—awed gratitude—are not sufficient for a doctrinal confession to do what it is supposed to do. According to McClendon, for a confession to be “felicitous,” it needs to fulfill all of these conditions. In that sense, sincere belief is not a sufficient condition for the “felicity” of a confession. Hence, McClendon's method does not repudiate the “facts” about the world—or references that represent a world that exists independent of a person or community—when it comes to theological confessions. However, at the same time, McClendon does not support the notion that theological controversies—the confirmation or disconfirmation of certain theological

claims—could be solved just by stating or gathering more facts. By appealing to Austin’s speech-act philosophy of language, McClendon’s theological method requires that certain state of affairs be present for the act of doctrinal confession to be “felicitous,” but, at the same time, it allows some margin for error in every speech-act where representation is involved. In McClendon’s method, the representative, primary, and affective elements of the religious utterances must be present and intertwined for the confession to “work” as a confession. Therefore, the importance of McClendon’s theological method at this point is the intimate interdependence of affective, representative, and primary conditions for “felicitous” utterance, the interconnection between language structure and persons, together with “whatever else there is” in the world.⁴⁰⁰

In McClendon’s theological method, it is the interdependence of affective, representative, and primary elements that provides meaning to Christian and baptist confessions because these elements are the ones that point to the use or role that these confessions have in a Christian form of life. Hence, for McClendon, as for other postliberal theologians, the meaning of a confession is not merely the correspondence between reality and the convictional language, as in the correspondence theory of language. However, contrary to other postliberals, McClendon highlights that for a confession to be meaningful, reference cannot be completely discarded., McClendon states that the meaning of a Christian confession is intratextual but, at the same time, and contrary to Frei and Lindbeck, it is not completely independent of reference.⁴⁰¹ Since Christian confessions do something in the world, since they are speech acts, their meaning resides in the connection between the intrabiblical, or intrabaptist, life, and the extrabiblical

⁴⁰⁰ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 66–78.

⁴⁰¹ Frei’s and Lindbeck’s notions of meaning were discussed in Chapter 1.

reality, whatever this extrabiblical reality may be. The reason for the relevance of reference in McClendon's method is that the meaning of the coherent convictional set of Christian confessions is also provided by the interconnected relations in the life of the person or the life of the community in which the person or community that utters that confession lives.⁴⁰² Hence, McClendon's theological method provides a response to the problem of reference in postliberal theology because the doctrinal confessions of the baptist communities are always in connection with a referent that is itself one of the elements of a confession.

By holding that reference is one of the elements of a doctrinal confession, McClendon's theological method allows applying valuations such as true and false to religious utterances, without the need to hold a linguistic theory of representation.⁴⁰³ However, at the same time, for McClendon, to say that something is true is more complicated than what the correspondence view of truth states. Truth could certainly be understood as correspondence between statement and facts in the world, as in the case of the representative theory of language, but truth could also be understood as the coherence among religious statements—according to a coherence theory of truth—or it could be focus on the pragmatic results of religious utterances as well—according to a pragmatic theory of truth.⁴⁰⁴ McClendon's theological method embraces all these different perspectives on truth by highlighting the affective, representative, and primary elements that make a religious utterance “felicitous,” providing meaning to the Christian and baptist confessions. Therefore, in McClendon's view, when it comes to a doctrine or confession, it is not possible to underscore just one perspective on truth. It is necessary to hold a broader perspective that includes and goes beyond any particular theory of truth. Even more, with respect to the

⁴⁰² McClendon, Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99.

⁴⁰³ McClendon, Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 74.

⁴⁰⁴ McClendon, Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78.

confirmation of the church's doctrinal confessions, it not possible for a theological method to focus solely on truth, since truth is just one measure of value among others—such as consistency, righteousness, justice, happiness, satisfaction, etc.—that are also in play when it comes to evaluating if a confession is “felicitous.” Hence, McClendon's theological method shows that the question about the truth of the church's confessions should not focus exclusively on epistemology. Confessions and doctrines are always utterances in connection to ethical and even aesthetic questions, and a theological method must integrate these different perspectives because it is use—what a doctrinal confession is and does—that determines what counts as an appropriate reference, and reference can go beyond a mere epistemological perspective.⁴⁰⁵ The reason for the interrelation between ethical, aesthetical, and epistemological perspectives is due to McClendon considering speech itself as a kind of action, and this speech-act activity necessarily has some sort of representative force that connects it to the existing world and the state of the speaker in that world, its situation or context.⁴⁰⁶ When a convictional set is judged from an epistemological perspective—wondering if the convictions or set of convictions are true or false—it is a judgment made from within a particular convictional border and context. Hence, it is a kind of self-judgment, an already convictional judgment that discards other convictional contexts and interests. No one could claim a position beyond a conviction.⁴⁰⁷

Since McClendon's theological method provides a response to the problem of reference in postliberal theology without falling into a relativistic non-foundationalism, but also without needing to resort to a referential theory of language as other foundationalist theologies do,

⁴⁰⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 9–17, 66–78, 155–59; Murphy, *Anglo-American Postmodernity*, 133.

⁴⁰⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 81.

⁴⁰⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 101–2.

McClendon's methodological proposal provides an avenue to overcome the epistemological crisis regarding the confirmation of theological claims that is in line with other proposals that are trying to find a middle way between foundationalism and non-foundationalism. In the preface of the last edition of *Biography as Theology*, McClendon states that "there is no foundational truth available apart from actual life, no set of timeless premises acceptable to believers and unbelievers alike, upon which Christian theology can once and for all found its doctrines. *Biography as Theology* is in that sense anti-foundational."⁴⁰⁸ This statement could be taken as representative of all of McClendon's theology. However, as I showed in the previous section, it is not possible to understand McClendon's work as a relativistic non-foundationalist or anti-foundationalist theology that reduces every theological claim to an intrasystemic profession of faith. As I mentioned in the Introduction, and as it is the case in McClendon's theological method, McClendon's "anti-foundational" position could be interpreted as a postfoundationalist position. As I will show in the next two sections, postfoundationalism acknowledges both the contextually rooted nature of all discourse and the force of the truth claims that such discourses nevertheless exert.⁴⁰⁹ Therefore, it desires to steer a middle ground between an extreme relativistic form of non-foundationalism, which ultimately could digress into a religious anti-realist position, and the naive realism of foundationalism.⁴¹⁰ For this reason, due to the postfoundationalist character of McClendon's theology, his theological method is a suitable alternative to overcome the current epistemological crisis over theological language, as I will show in the third and last section. But first, in the next section I will show the need for a postfoundationalist alternative to respond to the current epistemological crisis in theology.

⁴⁰⁸ McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, viii.

⁴⁰⁹ See Introduction; Murray, *Reason Truth and Theology in a Pragmatist Perspective*, 6.

⁴¹⁰ See Introduction.

II

The Postfoundationalist Alternative to Foundationalism and Non-foundationalism

According to F. LeRon Shults, although foundationalism and non-foundationalism are contrary positions, both share many of the same epistemological assumptions. On the one hand, foundationalism assumes that absolute foundations are needed in order to offer explanations capable of achieving universality, and therefore, in order to claim truth and knowledge. On the other hand, non-foundationalism embraces the fact that each community has its own form of rationality and, therefore, knowledge is always relative, particular to every local context and not universal.⁴¹¹ From this two sided perspective, the epistemological assumption is that knowledge is universal—and therefore, absolute—or contextual—and therefore, relative. In this sense, the only option for theologians to confirm their claims without falling into relativism seems to be the foundationalist enterprise. However, as I mentioned in the Introduction, one of the many signs of the major cultural transition of our time from modernity to postmodernity is the rejection of foundationalist epistemology. As Murray states, foundationalist epistemological assumptions are currently undermined as a wide range of thinkers have pointed to the illusory quality of any hope for a pure, guaranteed access to reality and the impossibility of grounding human knowledge in a context-neutral fashion. In this respect, human knowing is not only shaped in accordance with a characteristically human cognitive apparatus but is contingent upon the particular embedded practices and ideologically slanted perspectives of each and every knower.⁴¹² Therefore, the modern epistemological crisis for theology, due to the arrival of scientific criteria for knowledge and truth, led to the current postmodern epistemological crisis, where neither the theological

⁴¹¹ F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 25.

⁴¹² Murray, *Reason Truth and Theology in a Pragmatist Perspective*, 5.

foundationalism of the fundamentalist, conservative, and liberal theologies, nor the alleged relativism of postliberal theology, seem to provide an alternative to confirm theological claims beyond local epistemic contexts.

For Shults, a solution for the postmodern epistemological crisis in theology is the postfoundationalist model, which is a “middle way” position that transcends the problems of the foundationalist and non-foundationalist options.⁴¹³ Quoting J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, Shults states that over against the alleged objectivism of theological foundationalism and the extreme relativism of most forms of theological non-foundationalism, a postfoundationalist theology makes two moves:

First, it fully acknowledges contextuality, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that tradition shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic values that inform our reflection about God and what some of us believe to be God’s presence in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to point creatively beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation.⁴¹⁴

Shults clarifies that the prefix “post” in postfoundationalism does not mean “against” or “completely apart from” foundationalism. It certainly includes the idea of being “after,” but intentionally aims to accommodate the aspects of the foundationalist approach that made it seem so intuitively correct. Hence, for him, the prefix “post” is not the same as saying “anti” or “non” foundationalism because it does not reject the place for traditions and foundations—metaphorically speaking—in theology. In this respect, says Shults, the prefix “epi-” instead of “post” could also work, indicating the existence of “foundations” but recognizing the need for human thought to move constantly around, under, beside, within, and upon these foundations in

⁴¹³ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 25.

⁴¹⁴ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 4; quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 26.

an ongoing reconstructive process, capturing, at the same time, the value of the non-foundationalist “web” metaphor and avoiding the “edifice” imagery of foundationalism. However, Shults holds onto the term “postfoundationalist” for the sake of following scholarly parlance, although he mentions that there is actually no specific “school” of postfoundationalism.⁴¹⁵ For Shults, the postfoundationalist task is the response to a “foundational” problem in theology, the problem of articulating how theological claims may be rationally justified after the fall of foundationalism without succumbing to the fallacy of non-foundationalism.⁴¹⁶ Hence, in Shults’ view, a postfoundationalist theology is an alternative to a foundationalist and a non-foundationalist theology, challenging these dichotomous and dangerous extreme positions that so far have been uncritically accepted.⁴¹⁷ In this respect, before presenting the postfoundationalist option in detail in the next section, arguing that McClendon’s theological method could be considered as postfoundationalist, it is important to address the problems not only with the foundationalist epistemological model but also with the non-foundationalist model as well, the one that prevails in postliberal theology, showing why these dichotomous positions cannot be held anymore.

Foundationalism, in the “classical” sense, was a part of the Enlightenment project that considered reason as absolute.⁴¹⁸ That is, it claimed that “human reason could attain absolute and certain knowledge based on self-evident foundational experiences or *a priori* propositions, from

⁴¹⁵ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 27, fn 4.

⁴¹⁶ Shults, 30–31. For Shults, the adjective “foundational” is amphibolous. It points to the seriousness of the problem, but on the other hand it serves to illustrate that there is something pre-analytically intuitive about the metaphor of “foundations” when describing the structure of knowledge and argumentation. On the one hand, it is necessary to avoid the assumption that the use of the word “foundation” automatically entails that an argument or an author is foundational or, on the other hand, that the absence of the term in the presentation of an epistemic or hermeneutic theory is assurance that the author has successfully evaded the quagmire of foundational. Shults, 29–30.

⁴¹⁷ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 31.

⁴¹⁸ Shults, 31.

which necessary and universal conclusions could be reached.”⁴¹⁹ In spite of its many differences, says Shults, “all versions of the ‘classical’ foundationalist model insist that for a belief to be rationally justified, it must be *universally* valid, there must be *necessary* relations between it and the other components of the argument, and it must be the result of following precise *rules*.”⁴²⁰ In this respect, according to Shults, all the modern foundationalist philosophers—whether they were rationalists, empiricists, or idealists—accepted these criteria, but argued over what the rules were and how to determine universal validity. That is, they argued about how to defend the foundations and which rules to follow, and also argue about how to get these self-evident foundations in the first place.⁴²¹ However, for Shults, the main questions in this respect revolve around the basis for selecting the information from which to begin and the basis for the selection of the rules. That is, the main predicament is how to justify the basic rules that helped to select the first rules, or the basic information that led us to the selection of the original view.⁴²² In other words, “the classical foundationalist tries to solve the problem of the justification of beliefs by positing self-justifying or self-evident rules or beliefs. But how do we know we are following the right rules? We need rules to help us get to the right rules. And then we need rules to get at those rules, *ad infinitum*.”⁴²³ Hence, the problem with foundationalism, according to Shults, is its insistence on apodicticity and the belief that the constant critique of assumptions could be halted.⁴²⁴ For Shults, a similar regression results when we try to discover how we know something is self-evident, or when we inquire about the foundation for the proposed foundation.

⁴¹⁹ Shults, 31.

⁴²⁰ Shults, 33.

⁴²¹ Shults, 33.

⁴²² Shults, 33.

⁴²³ Shults, 33–34.

⁴²⁴ Shults, 31.

That is, the problem is identifying criteria for determining which rules or beliefs are self-justifying.⁴²⁵ In addition to this problem of infinite regress, Shults mentions that this classical model of rationality has also been criticized as self-referentially incoherent because its own assertion about the criteria for rationality does not meet the criteria. That is, the assertion of the classical definition of foundationalism is not universal, self-evident, or the result of rule-following.⁴²⁶

For Ronald F. Thiemann, the problem with an epistemological foundationalism is that it argues that, in order to claim knowledge, there must be self-evident, non-inferential beliefs or the whole pattern of inference is undermined. This argument assumes that if it is not possible to demonstrate the necessity of the ultimate sufficient reason or the first cause, then the entire causal chain or reasoning process stands without causal explanation.⁴²⁷ However, for Thiemann, every attempt to formulate an argument for a first cause appears to collapse into contradiction.⁴²⁸

In Thiemann's view, the foundationalist claim runs as follows:

Ordinary knowledge rests upon that intricate web of inferential beliefs we call a conceptual framework. Knowledge is justified true belief, and justification consists in tracing the pattern of inference supporting the belief in question until we find those true beliefs on which the questioned belief rests. If we accept those beliefs to be true, and if the pattern of inference is valid, then we can assert the belief in question to be a justified true belief. But, the foundationalist adds, we are not theoretically justified in bringing our inquiry to an end until we have discovered a self-evident, non-inferential belief, i.e., a belief that must be universally accepted as true. Positivists, idealists, and revelationalists alike accept this account of theoretical justification. But the arguments they propose to establish the non-inferential beliefs, usually through an appeal to intuition, inevitably conflict with their arguments for ordinary knowledge.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁵ Shults, 33–34.

⁴²⁶ Shults, 33–34.

⁴²⁷ Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 44–45.

⁴²⁸ Thiemann, 45.

⁴²⁹ Thiemann, 45.

In this respect, Thiemann illustrates the problem with foundationalism by presenting this inconsistent triad:

1. *X* intuitively knows the self-caused nature of *y* entails *X* non-inferentially knows that *y* is a first cause.
2. The ability to know first causes is given in the moment of discernment, independent of a conceptual frame.
3. The ability to know facts of the form *x* is ϕ is a skill acquired through the use of a conceptual frame.⁴³⁰

According to Thiemann, foundationalism wants to affirm all three of these propositions, but it cannot do it without using the word “know” equivocally. In this respect, he says,

if knowing that *y* is a first cause is a fact of the form *x* is ϕ , then it follows from proposition 3 that it is dependent on a conceptual frame. But if that is the case, then proposition 2 must be denied, and then the foundationalist case crumples altogether. If the foundationalist insists on affirming proposition 2, then a different account of *x* intuitively knows the self-caused nature of *y* must be given from that offered in proposition 1. But it is difficult to conceive of such an account that continues to uphold proposition 3, while still claiming that intuition is a form of knowing. In short the foundationalist position cannot be given self-consistent formulation.⁴³¹

Due to all of the problems with foundationalism, Thiemann proposes a non-foundationalist theology as an alternative. A non-foundationalist theology understands the theological task primarily as a descriptive activity. That is, for Thiemann, theology is a second order mode of reflection that aims to display the logic inherent in Christian belief and practice.⁴³² This non-foundationalist descriptive theology is able to make normative proposals but does not seek to justify those proposals by a foundational explanatory theory. On the contrary, in Thiemann’s view, theology as description is an interpretive activity which seeks to illuminate the structures embedded in beliefs and practices.⁴³³ He says, “descriptive theology eschews

⁴³⁰ Thiemann, 45.

⁴³¹ Thiemann, 45.

⁴³² Thiemann, 72.

⁴³³ Thiemann, 72.

theoretical defenses of Christian doctrine, seeking rather to show the intelligibility, aptness, and warranted assertability of Christian beliefs.”⁴³⁴ In that sense, the justification of Christian beliefs in this non-foundationalist theology requires close attention to the patterns inherent in the particular beliefs and practices of the church, rather than attention to a general theory which supposedly norms all religious discourse.⁴³⁵

Thiemann offers a sketch of what he considers the most important features of non-foundationalism, presenting three distinctive emphases that form the outline of his non-foundational descriptive theology. First of all, the non-foundational epistemic justification of Christian belief requires the assumption of a Christian conceptual frame supported by specific conventions and practices—that is, supported by the Christian community and tradition, which for Thiemann integrates what he calls the “Christian faith.”⁴³⁶ This Christian faith is “that set of beliefs and practices which in their social and historical reality provide the context for arguments about which beliefs and practices ought so to function”.⁴³⁷ In that sense, in Thiemann’s view, theology is not intended to provide universal arguments but is rather the vehicle by which arguments are voiced. Hence, theological positions are to be judged not by a universal criterion beyond the Christian tradition or by an imagined consensus within the community but by the content-specific arguments which theologians offer in support of their positions.⁴³⁸ Second, Thiemann states that his non-foundational view of theology implies a much closer relation between the direct “first-order” expressions of the church’s faith and the reflective “second-

⁴³⁴ Thiemann, 72.

⁴³⁵ Thiemann, 72.

⁴³⁶ Thiemann, 72.

⁴³⁷ Thiemann, 73.

⁴³⁸ Thiemann, 73.

order” activity of theology than most foundational views.⁴³⁹ For Thiemann, it is true that the Christian faith does not exist in a vacuum. The doctrine of God, Christology, anthropology, etc., are all influenced by concepts and categories derived from non-Christian sources. But such borrowings are employed for distinctive Christian uses and sustained by distinctive Christian practices, they are annexed for Christian purposes and ruled by the new Christian context, and therefore, are no longer entirely ruled by their original context. The primary context is supplied by the concepts’ use in Christian community. Consequently, a non-foundational theology seeks its criteria of judgment within the first-order language of church practice, according to criteria internal to the Christian faith. Hence, while some distinction between first- and second-order discourses remains, it is not sharp. For Thiemann, a non-foundationalist theology is a second-order activity precisely because it has no rationale independent of the first-order language of faith. It seeks the norm for faith and practice not beyond but within the first-order language of the church.⁴⁴⁰ Third, for Thiemann, a non-foundational theology does not seek to provide a universal theoretical defense of Christian language-as-such, nor aims to discern the causal relation between theological concepts and their external referents. Rather, it aims to provide a holist justification, seeking the relation between a disputed belief and the web of interrelated beliefs within which it rests.⁴⁴¹ That is, it operates within the framework of Christian beliefs.⁴⁴²

As a reply to the accusation that a non-foundationalist theology appears to be limited to describe what the Christian community believes but it cannot say anything about the truth or the referentiality of those beliefs, Thiemann states that a non-foundationalist theology rejects

⁴³⁹ Thiemann, 73.

⁴⁴⁰ Thiemann, 74–75.

⁴⁴¹ Thiemann, 75.

⁴⁴² Thiemann, 76.

foundationalist theology’s assumption “that the relation between Christian claims and God’s reality is *extrinsic*, so that claims about the church’s faith *cannot* be claims about an external God who stands outside all human language [emphasis in original].”⁴⁴³ On this assumption, says Thiemann, self-referential claims cannot imply claims about external reality and, therefore, theologians can only describe the meaning and use of Christian beliefs but do not have access to the domain of truth and reference.⁴⁴⁴ What a non-foundationalist theology rejects, however, is that God is extrinsically related to Christian belief, because it rejects the common picture of God as external causal agent. Hence, non-foundationalist theology also rejects the logical distinction between meaning and truth with regard to claims about God.⁴⁴⁵ For Thiemann,

God’s reality is *intrinsically* related to Christian belief and practice, if Christian claims about God are true. For Christians to speak about the gospel is at the same time to speak about the God of the gospel. That is to say, the logically odd category of “gospel” refers both to a human communication and a divine actor, and it must so refer if the gospel is what Christians confess it to be—the good news about God’s reconciling action on behalf of his creatures. But the report about God’s reconciliation cannot be separated from the good news itself, because the gospel is the *report* of God’s reconciliation, the present *gift* of that reconciliation, and the *promise* of the future triumph of God’s reconciling action [emphasis in original].⁴⁴⁶

In this respect, Thiemann adds that meaning and truth are sufficiently linked in the Christian gospel as to preclude a theory of truth and reference logically separable from an account of meaning. Therefore, a non-foundational theology does not propose an alternative theory of meaning and truth as the external ground of the gospel’s claims. When the internal logic of Christian claims is examined, says Thiemann, it is possible to discover that meaning and truth are closely intertwined, because God’s reality and Christian language are intrinsically and

⁴⁴³ Thiemann, 81.

⁴⁴⁴ Thiemann, 81.

⁴⁴⁵ Thiemann, 81.

⁴⁴⁶ Thiemann, 81.

internally related.⁴⁴⁷ In an endnote, Thiemann explicitly states that this non-foundationalist perspective is closely connected to Hans Frei's notion of *sensus literalis* and his interpretation of biblical narrative.⁴⁴⁸ In this respect, Thiemann also criticizes the view that a realistic reading of the Bible breaks down under the rise of a philosophical account of reality, independent of the Christian faith, which causes Christian reality claims to be identified with referential claims to historical occurrences or ideal essences, thereby becoming a subspecies of more general kinds of referential claims and, therefore, normed not by the explicative sense of the Christian narrative but by general philosophical rules for reference.⁴⁴⁹

As with a foundationalist theology, Thiemann's and other forms of non-foundationalist theologies also present some problems. For Shults, a non-foundationalist theology is diametrically opposed to a foundationalist one since it holds that there are no foundational beliefs that are independent of the support of other beliefs. In a non-foundationalist theology, knowledge subsists in a groundless web. In this regard, says Shults, justifying beliefs in a non-foundationalist theological method is only a matter of determining whether they cohere with all the other beliefs in its particular web or context, which is inherently dangerous because it could collapse into a self-referential incoherent relativism.⁴⁵⁰ Another problem with a non-foundationalist theology is its characteristic as a negative—or negating—phenomenon. For Shults, non-foundationalism exists primarily as a criticism, a negation, of foundationalism.⁴⁵¹ That is, “nonfoundationalism means giving up on the need for justifying the grammars of our

⁴⁴⁷ Thiemann, 82.

⁴⁴⁸ Thiemann, 174.

⁴⁴⁹ Thiemann, 85.

⁴⁵⁰ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 31.

⁴⁵¹ Shults, 36.

respective discourses. This move not only gives up the search for certain foundations, but also throws out the task for which foundationalism was developed: intersubjectively justifying our beliefs as reasonable.”⁴⁵² In this respect, says Shults, John Thiel’s version of non-foundationalism is a good example of the “either/or” mentality that has structured the current epistemological debate in theology. Shults mentions that Thiel, after stating that Christian practices draw their meaning from particular religious frameworks, insists that “there is no alternative to these practices except the foundationalist illusion of a universal reasoning to justify belief.”⁴⁵³ In that sense, for Shults, the main problem with non-foundationalism is that it considers that foundationalism and non-foundationalism exhaust the epistemological options in theology.⁴⁵⁴

By assuming that the Christian form of life is the only one that determines the meaning of the biblical narratives, a non-foundationalist theology dismisses the descriptivist theory of language regarding the biblical texts and rejects the role of reference in the determination of their meaning without providing any other theory of language as an alternative to the referential one. In this respect, as Thiemann explicitly states, a non-foundationalist theology rejects the logical distinction between meaning and truth with regard to claims about God exactly because it does not propose an alternative theory of meaning and truth as the external ground of the gospel’s claims.⁴⁵⁵ By doing this, a non-foundationalist theology seems to eliminate the possibility of confirmation of the Christian theological claims whatsoever. In this respect, Thiemann’s and Thiel’s non-foundationalist theology evidence the same problem that characterizes Frei’s and

⁴⁵² Shults, 36.

⁴⁵³ John Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 102; quoted by Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 36.

⁴⁵⁴ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 36.

⁴⁵⁵ Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 81–82.

Lindbeck's postliberal theology, the problem of reference. For Van Huyssteen, the problem of reference in this non-foundationalist theology is evident, and this form of theology is closely connected to postliberal theology, to the point that he identifies the two as one form of theology, what he calls a "non-foundationalist pure narrative theology." According to Van Huyssteen,

A nonfoundationalist pure narrative theology, with its concern for a descriptive justification internal to the Christian framework, eventually reveals a peculiar brand of neo-Wittgensteinian fideism. On this view religious beliefs have no need for explanatory support and in the end can hardly be seen as more than a groundless language game. In fact, these kinds of beliefs become a species of belief whose truth is discovered by means of criteria internal to the language game itself. The consequences of a so-called pure narrative theology therefore become clear: pure narrative theology leads not only to a relativistic understanding of justification, truth, and knowledge, but also to an epistemological relativism that would be fatal for the cognitive claims of theological statements.⁴⁵⁶

For Van Huyssteen, since postliberal theology consciously brackets the question of truth, its validity can be seen only as a kind of sectarian instrumentalism. That is, a theology that is meaningful at the cost of detaching its story from any dialogue with the world.⁴⁵⁷ According to him, the fact that postliberal theology effectively brackets the question of truth is the reason why this theology is popular among postmodern theologians, but it is also the major reason to be worried, because narrative theology in this mode becomes a retreat into the ghetto of a world created rather than illuminated by the scriptural text.⁴⁵⁸ He says,

a pure narrative theology that brackets the problem of the justification of the cognitive claims of theological statements in the end ignores the question of truth and the problem of the shaping of rationality in theological reflection. It also bypasses the problem of reference or reality depiction, as pure narrativists see the problem of justification in religious faith as entirely an internal, pragmatic matter.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁶ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 186.

⁴⁵⁷ Van Huyssteen, 188.

⁴⁵⁸ Van Huyssteen, 189.

⁴⁵⁹ Van Huyssteen, 189.

Hence, for Van Huyssteen, the cognitive claims of the Christian faith should be justified by many epistemic values like reality depiction, contextuality, problem solving, and explanatory progress.⁴⁶⁰ In this respect, Van Huyssteen reaches to the same conclusions of other theologians regarding the problem of reference in postliberal theology, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. That is,

that the question of an adequate theory of reference in theological theory formation must remain on the agenda of all forms of narrative theology... even in a postmodern paradigm it seems to be impossible to bracket the epistemological problems of validity, credibility, and truthfulness when dealing with religious narratives. For this reason systematic theology will have to deal responsibly with a valid theory of ... reference as a logical result of the basic realist assumptions and commitments of Christian theology.⁴⁶¹

However, as a response to Van Huyssteen's critique of postliberal theology, the next section will show that McClendon's theological work sets out a postliberal theological method that does not succumb to the problems of a non-foundationalist theology. In this respect, McClendon's approach results in a postfoundationalist theological method as well, although somehow different from Shult's and Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist proposals.

III

James McClendon's Postfoundationalist Alternative

As I mentioned in the previous sections, postfoundationalism could be understood as an epistemological model that assumes the contextuality of non-foundationalism but, at the same time, attempts to go beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation. In that sense, postfoundationalism tries to be an ongoing reconstructive process regarding the epistemic foundations of theology but avoiding the

⁴⁶⁰ Van Huyssteen, 189.

⁴⁶¹ Van Huyssteen, 190.

“edifice” imagery of foundationalism and embracing, at the same time, the non-foundationalist “web” metaphor. In this respect, I deem that McClendon’s theological method could be considered as an original form of postfoundationalist theology, in line with Shults’s description of postfoundationalism but also different from it, and different from other forms of postfoundationalist theology, such as the postconservative evangelical theologies, as I will describe in this section.

For Shults, the contours of the postfoundationalist epistemological model in theology have been outlined by J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen. As he mentions, Van Huyssteen’s postfoundationalist model for theology rejects foundationalism but it does not assume a relativistic anti-foundationalism. This postfoundationalist model embraces the role of traditioned experience, personal commitment, interpretation, and the provisional nature of all knowledge-claims, avoiding in this way the alleged necessity of opting for either foundationalism or anti-foundationalism.⁴⁶² Drawing heavily on Van Huyssteen’s work, but offering his own proposal, Shults develops four postfoundationalist couplets to describe the particular kind of relationality for theology that the postfoundationalist model asserts. These couplets are (1) experience and belief, (2) truth and knowledge, (3) individual and community, and (4) explanation and understanding.⁴⁶³ These four dyads illuminate the dichotomous framing of the debate due to foundationalism and non-foundationalism have been privileging one side of each dyad over the other, missing their dynamic relational unity. In that sense, Shults states that postfoundationalism accommodates the intuitions and concerns of both the foundationalist and the non-

⁴⁶² Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 38–39; Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 228.

⁴⁶³ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 27–28.

foundationalist models but in a way that transcends the assumptions of both sides.⁴⁶⁴ For Shults, the postfoundationalist model overcomes the several dichotomies of the other models because the various emphases in the postfoundationalist couplets are mutually supporting of each other and cannot be wholly understood in abstraction from the others, which is the opposite of what takes place in foundationalism and non-foundationalism, where dichotomy prevails.⁴⁶⁵

Shults presents the four couplets of postfoundationalism in detailed sentences, stating that they are proposed as representing the assertions of an “ideal type” and they are not intended to be exhaustive.⁴⁶⁶ These are:

(PF1): interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience.

(PF2): the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.

(PF3): rational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.

(PF4): explanation aims for universal, transcontextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations.⁴⁶⁷

The first part of each couplet aims to capture the positive intuitions of foundationalism, while the second part articulates the concern of non-foundationalism.⁴⁶⁸ What these four couplets show is that, as Shults says, “the postfoundationalist [model] wants to throw out the bath water (modernist certitude), but not the baby (the search for transcommunal criteria of rationality).”⁴⁶⁹ I consider that in some ways is possible to perceive Shults’ four couplets in McClendon’s theological method, which results in seeing McClendon as not only offering an original

⁴⁶⁴ Shults, 27–28.

⁴⁶⁵ Shults, 42.

⁴⁶⁶ Shults, 43.

⁴⁶⁷ Shults, 43.

⁴⁶⁸ Shults, 43.

⁴⁶⁹ Shults, 36.

postliberal theology but also a postfoundationalist theological proposal. The main reason for the inclusion of McClendon's method in the postfoundationalist model, as I will show, is its response to the problem of reference in postliberal theology.

Regarding the first couplet, experience and belief, Shults states that a postfoundationalist approach claims that a balance between the foundationalist stress on the "basis of experience" and the non-foundationalist emphasis on the "web of belief" is possible.⁴⁷⁰ In this respect, the postfoundationalist approach aims for the couplet referred above as PF1. That is, "interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience." Shults says the key concept in this first couplet is the phrase "interpreted experience," and it is specifically aimed against foundationalist conceptions that would allow some beliefs to bypass experience or to enter the "web" of beliefs neutrally, without being interpreted.⁴⁷¹ In this sense, says Shults, "beliefs are both brought to experience and derived from it, and our interpreted experience thus becomes the matrix within which meaning and knowledge arise."⁴⁷² Therefore, postfoundationalism holds a balance that affirms both the way beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience and the broader networks of belief in which rationally compelling experiences are already embedded.⁴⁷³ This postfoundationalist couplet, says Shults, "overcomes the nonfoundationalist worry about a linear justification of rationality that moves only from experience to beliefs. It also responds to the foundationalist anxiety about attempts to divorce our reasons for believing something from our experience of the world."⁴⁷⁴ It

⁴⁷⁰ Shults, 43.

⁴⁷¹ Shults, 44.

⁴⁷² Shults, 45.

⁴⁷³ Shults, 45; Van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality*, 37.

⁴⁷⁴ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 45.

shows that two complementary criteria are needed for the confirmation of theological claims. That is, experiential adequacy and epistemological adequacy.⁴⁷⁵ PF1 also challenges the non-foundationalist assumption that webs of belief limit and determine what is experienced. For the postfoundationalist model, the network of belief does not limit or determine what is experienced but only informs the interpretation of it.⁴⁷⁶

The first couplet of a postfoundationalist theology is present on McClendon's theological method since he grants a specific role for reference in the theological claims. Although McClendon's method rests on postliberal assumptions—such as intratextuality and the regulative role of doctrine—that highlight the coherence within the “web” of theological claims and discard the view that it is possible to form theological claims in a neutral manner without a previous communal interpretation, it also shows that is not enough for a theological speech act to be valid or “felicitous” if there is no relation between its claims and the state of affairs appropriate to that sort of theological speech act. Therefore, the fact that in McClendon's proposal there is an intimate interdependence of affective, representative, and primary conditions for “felicitous” theological utterances—an interconnection between language structure and persons, together with “whatever else there is” in the world—means that his theological method displays a postfoundationalist balance between the Christian theological claims and how they are experienced and interpreted outside the Christian community.⁴⁷⁷ For McClendon, as for other non-foundationalist postliberal theologians, the meaning of a confession or theological claim is not merely situated in the correspondence between reality and the convictional language, as in the correspondence theory of language. However, McClendon's method highlights that reference

⁴⁷⁵ Shults, 45; Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 71.

⁴⁷⁶ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 46.

⁴⁷⁷ See Chapter 3 section I; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 66–78.

cannot be completely discarded for a confession to be meaningful.⁴⁷⁸ The meaning of theological claims, as speech acts, resides in the connection between the intrabiblical beliefs and the extrabiblical reality as a base for the interpreted experience of the world.

The second couplet of a postfoundationalist epistemological model, truth and knowledge, aims to transcend the dichotomy between the notion of a singular understanding of truth and knowledge—present in the foundationalist model—and the notion of a plurality of understandings about truth and knowledge—present in the non-foundationalist perspective.⁴⁷⁹ For this reason, the postfoundationalist couplet PF2 states that “the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims.” Shults highlights that this couplet distinguishes between objectivity and subjectivity, and between unity and multiplicity, without establishing a complete division between these elements.⁴⁸⁰ For him, the goal of a postfoundationalist model is “to maintain the foundationalist vision of truth as an ideal that drives our inquiry, but to avoid arrogating one’s current knowledge as the total and final metanarrative, a danger against which the nonfoundationalist rightly warns.”⁴⁸¹ According to Shults, the role of intelligibility and fallibility that this couplet mentions is necessary for finding a safe epistemological space for theology that could avoid both the absolutism of foundationalism and the relativism of non-foundationalism. For him, the emphasis on intelligibility aims to accommodate the foundationalist intuitions about truth as an ideal, while the insistence on fallibility accommodates the non-foundationalist worry about absolutism and

⁴⁷⁸ See Chapter 3 section I; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99.

⁴⁷⁹ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50.

⁴⁸⁰ Shults, 50.

⁴⁸¹ Shults, 50.

hegemonic totalization.⁴⁸² Hence, while a postfoundationalist theology acknowledges the ideal of objectivity, it does not entail objectivism.⁴⁸³ The function of fallibilism in postfoundationalist thought serves as protection against this objectivism. In order to avoid fideism, says Shults, it is necessary to hold the ideals of truth, objectivity, and rationality, while, at the same time, acknowledging the provisional, contextual, and fallible nature of human reason.⁴⁸⁴ Quoting Van Huyssteen, Shults underscores that, “over against the objectivism of foundationalism and the extreme relativism of most forms of nonfoundationalism, some of us want to develop a postfoundationalist model of rationality that is thoroughly contextual, but that at the same time will attempt to reach beyond the limits of its own group or culture in interdisciplinary discussion.”⁴⁸⁵

As I mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the notion of truth in McClendon’s theological method includes a certain correspondence between statement and facts in the world, similar to the representative theory of language. However, McClendon’s notion of truth also includes the coherence among theological statements and focus on the pragmatic results of theological utterances as well, similar to the coherence theory of truth and the pragmatic theory of truth respectively.⁴⁸⁶ Therefore, it is possible to say that McClendon’s method aims to transcend the notions of truth in both foundationalist and non-foundationalist models, which puts his method in line with the second couplet of a postfoundationalist theology. In McClendon’s theological method, the objective unity of truth is actually given by the plurality of notions of

⁴⁸² Shults, 51.

⁴⁸³ Shults, 55.

⁴⁸⁴ Shults, 58; Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 259.

⁴⁸⁵ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 55–56; Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 245.

⁴⁸⁶ Section III of Chapter 3; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78.

truth, and this plurality avoids a totalizing notion of knowledge. As I mentioned in the second section in Chapter 2, McClendon discards the “imperialist” position that states that with time, effort, and a specific method, it will be possible to reach an ultimate truth.⁴⁸⁷ However, at the same time, McClendon deems that to recognize plurality does not bound us to “relativism.”⁴⁸⁸ For McClendon, it is possible to hold “perspectivism” as a third position that claims that there is no need to jettison truth and knowledge.⁴⁸⁹ As Ryan Andrew Newson says, McClendon holds to the fallibility principle, yet does not think we should (or can) hold our convictions loosely—that would be impossible, since “we are our convictions.” In that sense, for McClendon, convictions might be false and are subject to rejections, reformulation, improvement, and reformation.⁴⁹⁰ In this respect, in line with the postfoundationalist perspective, McClendon’s highlights the intelligibility but also the fallibility of all theological claims, finding a safe epistemological space for theology that avoids both the absolutism of foundationalism and the relativism of non-foundationalism.

Shults states that foundationalism tends to privilege the individual in discussions of reason, while non-foundationalism, on the other hand, has affirmed the postmodern critique of individualism, highlighting the dependence of rationality on the historical communal context out of which it operates.⁴⁹¹ Hence, the third couplet of a postfoundationalist epistemological model, individual and community, aims to accommodate the intuitions of both sides without collapsing into absolutism or relativism.⁴⁹² The postfoundationalist couplet PF3 argues that “rational

⁴⁸⁷ Section II in Chapter 2; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 8.

⁴⁸⁸ See section II in Chapter 2; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 8–9.

⁴⁸⁹ See section II in Chapter 2; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 9.

⁴⁹⁰ Newson, *Inhabiting the World*, 113–14; McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 112.

⁴⁹¹ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 59.

⁴⁹² Shults, 60.

judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.” Hence, the postfoundationalist model argues that the locus of rational choice is the individual agent, but, at the same time, affirms that what a person judges to be rational is affected by the cultural-historical context of that person.⁴⁹³ In this way, says Shults, the postfoundationalist model “acknowledges the nonfoundationalist sensitivity to the hermeneutical conditioning effected by being situated in a community of inquirers, but refuses to give up the intuition of the foundationalist that it is the individual who actually *makes* a rational judgment.”⁴⁹⁴ Postfoundationalism moves away from modernist notions of universal, acontextual standards, but also provides a role for the individual in the relation of the self to the community. That is, it considers that rationality is mediated, but not determined, by the community.⁴⁹⁵ Van Huyssteen’s proposal is that a postfoundationalist model avoids the pitfalls of individualistic dogmatism and communitarian relativism by moving “from individual judgment to communal evaluation to intersubjective conversation.”⁴⁹⁶ In other words, the individual’s judgment is in turn shaped by the tradition of the community, but this does not entail either accepting tradition uncritically or radically rejecting it. Hence, the postfoundationalist model, for Shults, conceives of tradition in a way which allows for full commitment and yet is open to criticism.⁴⁹⁷

As I presented in the first section of this chapter, for McClendon, theology is the rational study of the convictions of the Christian community, and theology’s goal is to discover these

⁴⁹³ Shults, 60.

⁴⁹⁴ Shults, 60.

⁴⁹⁵ Shults, 61.

⁴⁹⁶ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, “Tradition and the Task of Theology,” *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (July 1, 1998): 224; Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 61.

⁴⁹⁷ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 61–62.

convictions, but also to interpret and criticize them, in light of other disciplines and in relation to “whatever else there is” in the world.⁴⁹⁸ Hence, McClendon’s theological method aims to creatively transform the Christian communal convictions into better ones.⁴⁹⁹ Within this theological endeavor, doctrinal theology is understood as the critical and academic examination of the church’s practice of teaching doctrine, the common teaching of the church’s convictions.⁵⁰⁰ In that sense, and since for him the convictions of the church can be criticized and transformed, McClendon’s theological method neither privileges the church’s tradition nor the individual, and thus results in a postfoundationalist way of doing theology. On the one hand, for McClendon, in agreement with the postfoundationalist couplet PF3, theology is a rational judgment of socially situated individuals. In McClendon’s case, theology is a judgment of individuals that are part of the baptist community of reference, which holds the shared theological narrative provided by the baptist vision. In this respect, individuals are formed by the baptist communal religious convictions but, at the same time, every individual for McClendon is also responsible for the communal convictions, to the point that the community can change them, opting for better convictions. On the other hand, it is this baptist community of faith that indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality, without discarding the individual agent of theological reflection. By proposing a specific baptist theology— a distinctive theoretic web of baptist common convictions—McClendon shows that his theological method is mediated, but not determined, by the community. Hence, there is no individualistic dogmatism or communitarian relativism in McClendon’s method. His method not only aims to discover and interpret the convictions of the sharers of the baptist vision, but also enables theologians to confront today’s

⁴⁹⁸ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23, 38; McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

⁴⁹⁹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:34; McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

⁵⁰⁰ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 2:24.

baptist communities with proposals to revise and transform their convictions.⁵⁰¹ That is, it displays a normative vision for baptist communities, which is a creative and transformative task of an individual in a community. In this case, the individual is McClendon himself.⁵⁰²

The fourth and final postfoundationalist couplet tries to respond to the dichotomy between explanation, according to universal laws, and understanding, which focuses on things in their particularity in light of the whole of its context.⁵⁰³ According to Shults, a foundationalist theology tends to model its task after the natural sciences, aiming to offer absolute explanations derived by following specific rules that are considered to be true regardless of tradition or context.⁵⁰⁴ A non-foundationalist theology, on the other hand, states that its task aims at understanding, arguing that all understanding is conditioned by the historical context within which it occurs and, hence, is rooted in particular traditions that have their own coherence.⁵⁰⁵ In this respect, a non-foundationalist theology is content with securing its place among the human sciences, limiting its role to the analysis of language games or to a depth description of the forms of life of particular faith communities.⁵⁰⁶ As an alternative to this dichotomy, says Shults, a postfoundationalist model for theology stresses the mutual conditioning of two movements in human rationality, arguing the PF4 couplet: “explanation aims for universal, transcontextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations.”⁵⁰⁷ For Shults, the postfoundationalist model reveals that the dichotomy between explanation and

⁵⁰¹ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:34.

⁵⁰² McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23, 34.

⁵⁰³ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 68–69.

⁵⁰⁴ Shults, 69.

⁵⁰⁵ Shults, 70.

⁵⁰⁶ Shults, 70.

⁵⁰⁷ Shults, 70.

understanding is false since both share common resources of rationality, including the quest for intelligibility.⁵⁰⁸ In both theology and science, says Van Huyssteen, intelligibility is the supreme value that determines rationality. What is real for both theology and for science is not the observable but the intelligible, and in both realms beliefs and practices are attempts to understand at the deepest level, where understanding can be construed as seeking the best explanation.⁵⁰⁹ For Van Huyssteen, “the subjectivity of interpreting belongs right in the heart of the explanatory task.”⁵¹⁰ For him, the subjectivity of every explanation does not lead to relativism but to an ongoing rational reconstruction of theological understanding. That is, “theological explanations attempt to establish a link between the inherited beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition and the contemporary experience of its adherents.”⁵¹¹ For Shults, the problem with the non-foundationalist model is that it ignores the first part of PF4, that is, the recognition that explanations are universal in intent and try to overcome boundaries and contexts, even if that is not finally possible. The problem with the foundationalist model, on the other hand, is that it misses the second part of PF4 for fear of relativism.⁵¹² In contrast to both perspectives, a theology according to the postfoundationalist model wants to escape relativism without retreating into absolutism, stating that theological rationality must involve a fallible search for intelligibility and should be open to constant interdisciplinary dialogue.⁵¹³ For

⁵⁰⁸ Shults, 71.

⁵⁰⁹ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 163.

⁵¹⁰ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 232; Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 71.

⁵¹¹ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 274; Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 71.

⁵¹² Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 72.

⁵¹³ Shults, 72.

postfoundationalism, says Shults, “attempts to understand involve seeking the best explanation, and explanations emerge out of and lead to new interpretive understandings.”⁵¹⁴

In order to show how McClendon’s theological method integrates explanation and understanding, it is necessary to recall that, for him, theology is the science of convictions.⁵¹⁵ That is, McClendon considers that theology is a discipline of study similar to other sciences, but also different because it displays a specific rationality appropriate to its own area of knowledge, concentrating on the convictions of the Christian community. In this respect, McClendon states that theology’s goal is not just to discover these convictions but also interpret and criticize them, transforming the church’s convictions into better ones.⁵¹⁶ He also claims that, in order to reach its goal, theology must be done in light of other disciplines and in relation to “whatever else there is” in the world.⁵¹⁷ In this sense, although McClendon is developing a postliberal theology that focuses on a description of the Christian conceptual frame—supported by the Christian community, its tradition and shared biblical narratives in light of the baptist vision—it is important to notice that he also aims for intelligibility regarding Christian convictions, offering his postliberal theology in the form of a systematic theology. That is, he offers his theology in the form of a unified presentation of Christian convictions that attempts to universal and transcontextual explanations of those convictions to establish a link between the inherited beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition, the baptist community, and the contemporary experience of its adherents. In this respect, every systematic theology could be conceived as a theological explanation, since it is universal in intent, and, because of that, it aims to overcome

⁵¹⁴ Shults, 72.

⁵¹⁵ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:35.

⁵¹⁶ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23, 38; McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

⁵¹⁷ McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 1:23, 38; McClendon Jr., *Biography as Theology*, 20.

boundaries, even though it is, at the same time, inevitably local and contextual.⁵¹⁸ Contrary to other systematic theologies, McClendon's systematic focus on the shared biblical narratives according to the baptist vision, but this is not a reason to discard his theology as a form of explanation, since, as Van Huyssteen claims, to narrate is to explain. For Van Huyssteen, all biblical narratives are already interpretations, and biblical concepts in themselves could be taken as "minitheories," revealing the way in which Scripture was received and interpreted through the ages.⁵¹⁹ In this sense, as Van Huyssteen highlights, in spite of some important differences between theology and the other sciences, what unites these disciplines is the rationality behind their specific goals. That is, what unites explanation and understanding in theology is intelligibility, as understanding at the deepest possible level, where understanding can be construed as seeking the best explanation. A better understanding of the Christian convictions is what McClendon also aims to.⁵²⁰

Although I have stated that it is possible to understand McClendon's theological method as postfoundationalist, I also consider that it is somehow different from Shults's and Van Huyssteen's proposals, and also different from the postfoundationalist proposals of postconservative evangelical theologians. As I mentioned before, Shults considers that a non-foundationalist theology could collapse into a dangerous self-referential incoherent relativism because it holds no foundational beliefs but beliefs that subsists in a groundless "web" of mutual

⁵¹⁸ McClendon does frame his systematic theology as speaking to a particular community in a particular time and place, suggesting that baptists in other times and places will need to revise his work. But this claim can be read as an expression of McClendon's views on convictions as described above. McClendon, in other words, is both making universal claims he thinks are valid beyond his community and is acknowledging the context in and for which those claims are made.

⁵¹⁹ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 185.

⁵²⁰ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 164.

supporting beliefs.⁵²¹ In that sense, although Shults proposes the postfoundationalist model as an option between foundationalism and non-foundationalism, he still seems to hold a notion of language in which the connection between reference and meaning is close to the foundationalist theory of reference. That is, his notion of language holds that words refer to or represent ideas, and ideas, in turn, stand for something in the world. For Shults, the perspective of ordinary language philosophy regarding meaning as use in ordinary life seems not to be valid. Hence, he claims that a theory of reference is still needed in order to determine the meaning of theological terms and sentences. This claim about a need for a theory of reference is more evident in Van Huyssteen's work. As I mentioned before, he specifically says that the question of an adequate theory of reference must remain in the postliberal agenda. He also states that systematic theology needs a valid theory of reference as a logical result of the basic realist assumptions and commitments of Christian theology.⁵²² In this respect, it seems that, according to Shults's and Van Huyssteen's perspective, the only option for language to have meaning is to connect it with an "outside" referent, a "thing" in the world, in line with the representative or referential perspective on language, predominant in a foundationalist epistemological model.

Besides Shults and Van Huyssteen, a group of postconservative evangelical theologians also hold a form of postfoundationalism by abandoning foundationalism. However, according to Steven B. Sherman's presentation of this group of theologians, these evangelicals also seem to hold a representative or referential perspective on language. As Sherman indicates, postconservative evangelical theologians such as Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Robert Webber, among others, are interested in reclaiming a more dynamic theory of knowledge and

⁵²¹ Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 31.

⁵²² Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 190.

eager to move closer to what can be described as an epistemological holism. These evangelicals aim to recover premodern insights relative to ideas of knowledge and truth, imparting interpretive responsibility to the domain of the Christian community.⁵²³ However, the postfoundationalist proposal of these postconservative theologians includes a critique of postliberal theology regarding reference. For these postconservative evangelicals, the postliberal notion of meaning as use is highly valuable. However, they state that a complete break between reference and meaning still seems too dangerous for theology and for the truth claims of Christian religion. That is, even though they are in agreement with the cultural-linguistic notion of postliberalism, they still consider that postliberal theology fails to disclose adequately an ontology with respect to the signified, the referent, leaving vacuous any substantial place for metaphysical or eschatological realism. Hence, postconservative evangelical theologians seem to have adopted some aspects of a postliberal theology, claiming to hold a postfoundationalist position that values holism, but, at the same time, they have argued that a more robust account of the propositional or narrative referent of doctrinal claims is necessary.⁵²⁴

I deem that McClendon's theological method is a viable and better alternative for the epistemological crisis over theological language because, contrary to Shults, Van Huysteen, and the postconservative evangelical theologians that Sherman refers to, McClendon's method is a postfoundationalist proposal that presents a different understanding of language that does not follow the traditional foundationalist model regarding the connection between reference and meaning. McClendon's theological method does not need a theory of reference because it does not see language as basically representative or referential. As I mentioned in the first section of

⁵²³ Steven B. Sherman, *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology: Holistic Evangelical Approaches to the Knowledge of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 136, 187.

⁵²⁴ Sherman, 124.

this chapter, McClendon considers that theological claims do something in the world, they are speech acts. Due to this characteristic, the meaning of any theological claim resides in the connection between the intraconfessional Christian life and the extraconfessional reality. The reason that reference is relevant in McClendon's method is that the meaning of the coherent convictional set of Christian confessions is also provided by the interconnected relations in the life of the person or the life of the community in which the person or community who utters that confession lives.⁵²⁵ Hence, whatever this extraconfessional reality may be, the meaning of theological claims does not actually reside in the connection between Christian language and an "outside" referent because there are no uninterpreted "things" in the world, only "things" referred to by other confessions, perceived from other convictional communities. In other words, McClendon does, as I have discussed, see reality as existing beyond the claims of any particular community. On the basis of McClendon's work, I have thus employed the language of "extrabiblical reality" and called for interdisciplinary and intercommunal conversation. My point, though, is that McClendon sees reality as *inhabited* by biblically shaped and other communities—we are not separated by our communities from reality. The place McClendon makes for reference is therefore not a place for a neutral theory of how all language refers to an "outside," but rather a place for convictional accounts of how communal claims about reality work, which claims can be compared critically by different communities in conversation.⁵²⁶

Since for McClendon, every conviction unavoidably shapes not just the notion about what is true, but also the notion about what is actually present in the world and how every individual and community relates to it, truth cannot be reduced to the relation of correspondence

⁵²⁵ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 99.

⁵²⁶ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 101–9.

between any internally formed conviction and a supposedly “external” world, as the foundationalist model claims. For McClendon, “whatever else there is” in the world is necessarily known from a convictional standpoint, which is also influenced by other convictional standpoints that would also consider that something is true or false depending on their relation with other convictional positions. Therefore, every reference always participates in uttered convictions or confessional theological claim because the referents are always, in some way, an internal element of all conviction. That is, due to convictions always interacting with each other, every external reference is also embedded in every conviction. The referent, therefore, is always established between a conviction and “whatever else there is,” as this “whatever else there is” is disclosed by that conviction. That is why, as McClendon highlights, for a confession of a conviction to be “truthful,” truth cannot be the only parameter to evaluate a confession because every confession participates directly in the world. Hence, there is no world “outside” the world that is disclosed by a confession, and a claim about the supremacy of “truth” as the only valid parameter is also convictional. Rather, a confession is formed within and for “whatever else there is.” This interconnection of conviction and referent is made explicit in a confession since every confessional language is constitutive of the world, formed within and for the world. In sum, for McClendon, there is no division of language/reality.⁵²⁷ He says that “speaking, uttering speech-acts, doing by and in speaking, is a way of participating in a way of life. Language is no mere epiphenomenon, the verbal cherry on the sundae of life. It is the very stuff of which the sundae is made.”⁵²⁸ The value of including reference for a “felicitous” confession is not, then, for appealing to a world “outside” the world disclosed by that speech act, but to direct attention to

⁵²⁷ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78.

⁵²⁸ McClendon Jr. and Smith, *Convictions*, 78.

how every confessional language more or less fits the shared world inhabited by people with different convictions. Hence, debating reference is to enter into a conversation about our different convictions of the world, and through such conversation to come to judgments about the relative adequacy of multiple convictional views. At the end, McClendon does not “solve” the problem of reference in postliberal theology but rather “dissolve” it by proposing a different understanding of reference and, finally, a different understanding of how language works in theological claims. It is because of this characteristic of McClendon’s theological method that I deem it as a better alternative for the epistemological crisis over theological language. By following McClendon’s method, it is now possible to have a truly postfoundationalist option that does not need a theory of reference to determine the meaning of theological terms and sentences, as is needed in a foundationalist epistemological model. Due to McClendon’s method, it is also not necessary to circumscribe the meaning of theological claims to the confines of the Christian community, retreating theology to the ghetto of a world created rather than illuminated by the scriptural text and the Christian convictions, as non-foundationalist postliberal theologies seem to do, eliminating in this the possibility of confirmation of the Christian theological claims entirely.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this work, the modern and postmodern epistemological crisis inevitably affected theology, to the point that neither the outdated foundationalist approach nor the non-foundationalist option seem to be viable alternatives for the confirmation of theological claims. On the one hand, foundationalist theology, which is fueled by the desire for a “pure” access to reality in order to ground human knowledge in a context-neutral fashion, is currently perceived as an illusion, although it is still the predominant epistemological model in most theological schools. On the other hand, a non-foundationalist theology, which appears to be limited to describe the Christian beliefs without saying anything regarding the truth or the referentiality of those beliefs, is perceived as inherently dangerous because it seems to eliminate the possibility of confirmation for Christian theological claims, leaving Christianity in a state of self-referential, incoherent relativism. In this respect, it seems that neither the liberal, fundamentalist, or conservative theologies, which follow a foundationalist epistemological framework, nor postliberal theology, which assumes postmodern epistemological notions and consciously rejects foundationalism, are valid alternatives for the current predicament regarding theological language. However, I have proposed in this work that a specific postliberal theological method, McClendon’s method, could still be a valuable resource in order to provide an alternative to the current epistemological crisis in theological language. The main reason for offering McClendon’s method as an alternative is that although his proposal does not offer a theory of reference in order to affirm the truth of theological claims, at the same time it does not discard reference regarding theological language, contrary to most forms of postliberal theology. In that sense, McClendon’s theological method does not reduce every theological claim to an intrasystemic profession of faith because it does not completely deny truth as correspondence as

a valid theological notion. Hence, McClendon offers an alternative for the confirmation of theological claims that overcomes the problems with foundationalist and non-foundationalist theologies, introducing a distinctive form of postfoundationalist theology.

In chapter 1, I presented the problem regarding truth or referentiality in postliberal theology in detail, stating that this problem of reference is one of the major issues regarding the postliberal theological proposal. This problem refers to the fact that since postliberal theology assumes that the Christian form of life is the only one that determinates the meaning of the biblical narratives, it dismisses the descriptivist theory of language regarding the biblical texts and rejects the role of reference in the determination of their meaning. The main issue with this postliberal position is that, by removing the need for any theory of reference, it seems to eliminate the truth of the biblical narratives because it does not separate meaning from reference altogether without providing any other theory. In that first chapter, I also underscore that Frei's and Lindbeck's responses to the problem of reference remain inadequate to offer a complete rebuttal to the critics. I mentioned that for Knight and other critics, postliberal theology not only denies the need of reference for theology claims but it goes against the theory of reference and the descriptivist theory of language, making it impossible to consider postliberal theology as an alternative for the epistemological crisis in theology. As a response to these critiques, my main goal in this work has been to show how a specific postliberal theology, McClendon's, offers a theological method that bypasses this problem of reference. In order to reach my main goal, I offered a summary of McClendon's work in chapter 2, focusing on several elements of his theology that reveal his theological method. Based on that summary, I claimed in chapter 3 that, due to McClendon's theology granting a place for reference in his theological method, it offers an alternative to respond to the problem of reference in postliberal theology, making it possible

to confirm theological claims without the need for a theory of reference. By highlighting some of its specific characteristics, I also stated that McClendon's theological method could be considered as a postliberal theology that, contrary to other postliberal theologies, is based on a postfoundationalist epistemological model. In this respect, McClendon's theology provides an avenue to overcome the epistemological crisis regarding the confirmation of theological claims without needing to resort to a modern foundationalism and without falling into a relativistic non-foundationalism.

In order to highlight McClendon's postliberal and postfoundationalist theological method as an alternative for the current development of the theological task, further research is imperative, especially a more comprehensive and detailed comparison between McClendon's proposal and some of the other proposals that I mentioned in this work. That is, it is necessary to compare McClendon's theological method to Van Huyssteen's postfoundationalist approach in detail, especially regarding their different understanding of language and the value of postliberal theology in contemporary theology.⁵²⁹ Also, it is important to establish the difference between McClendon's theological method and the proposal of postconservative evangelical theologians, especially in light of the fact that McClendon sometimes is posed as belonging to that school of theology.⁵³⁰ Offering a comprehensive investigation of current proposals around ordinary

⁵²⁹ Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*; Van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality*; Van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988).

⁵³⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2000); Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993); Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2002); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002); João B. Chaves places McClendon among postconservative evangelical theologians in *Evangelicals and Liberation Revisited: An Inquiry into the Possibility of an Evangelical-Liberationist Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

language philosophy, in dialogue with other disciplines such as literary studies, seems important to reveal McClendon's use of Austin's and Wittgenstein's philosophies of language in connection with newer interpretation of these philosophers. In this sense, it seems necessary to mention the work of Toril Moi and Sandra Laugier.⁵³¹ It would also be important to compare McClendon's theological method with other contemporary proposals that draw on recent work between theology and language, such as Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics* and others.⁵³²

Finally, since McClendon's theology is a postfoundationalist alternative for the epistemological crisis over theological language that considers not only the intrasystemic conditions to properly utter theological claims but that also the representative conditions for these claims—that is, the state of affairs that a particular Christian community, situated in a specific place and time, considers relevant due to its context—his theological method pushes theology to a serious consideration of the context of every Christian convictional community. McClendon's theological method and system could be a useful heuristic to construct contextual postfoundationalist postliberal theologies, since it recognizes that the confirmation of theological claims requires attention to the contexts in which various Christian communities make those claims. McClendon's theology can shed light on how to develop postliberal theologies that could “defuse” religious relativism and that, at the same time, could embrace the context of every particular Christian community, especially in places where other religions and secular ideologies present an important challenge to Christian theology. In that sense, McClendon's method is a

⁵³¹ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Sandra Laugier, *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, trans. Daniela Ginsburg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁵³² Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

helpful framework that could be used to provide an opportunity to re-assess the gains of this theological school in regard to the wider issues of Christian theology, highlighting in this way why an understanding of the Christian faith as a cultural-linguistic system is pertinent for other contexts—for example, not just the North American context—and, therefore, should not be neglected.

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