

Philosophy and Religious Language  
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The purpose of this lecture is to present an example of the kind of analysis which can be done under the auspices of the John Nuveen Chair of Philosophical Theology. Let me take this opportunity to present this lecture as a tribute of my respect and gratitude to Mrs. Nuveen.

My title expresses in a few words a certain number of assumptions that it will be my task to clarify as far as is possible in the space of an hour.

The first assumption is that, for a philosophical inquiry, a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse. This first contention does not say that language, that linguistic expression, is the only dimension of the religious phenomenon; nothing is said—either pro or con—concerning the controversial notion of religious experience, whether we understand experience in a cognitive, a practical, or an emotional sense. What is said is only this: whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression.

The second assumption is that this kind of discourse is not senseless, that it is worthwhile to analyze it, because something is said that is not said by other kinds of discourse—ordinary, scientific, or poetic, or, to put into more positive terms, that it is meaningful at least for the community of faith which uses it either for the sake of self-understanding or for the sake of communication with others exterior to the faith community.

My third presupposition is that philosophy is implied in this inquiry because this kind of discourse does not merely claim to be meaningful, but also to be true. This claim must be understood on its own terms. It implies that we do not yet recognize the truth value of this kind of language if we do not put in question the criteria of truth which are borrowed from other spheres of discourse, mainly the scientific one, whether we invoke a criterion of verification, or a criterion of falsification. The presupposition here is that philosophy is confronted by a mode of discourse which displays claims both to meaningfulness and to fulfilment such that new dimensions of reality and truth are disclosed, and that a new formulation of truth is required.

Such are the main presuppositions implied in my title, “Philosophy and Religious Language” (or discourse).

My intention is to clarify these presuppositions one after the other by using the specific approach of a theory of interpretation, or, in more technical terms, of a philosophical hermeneutics.

Let me introduce this method by contrasting it with Anglo-American linguistic analysis on the issues raised by the three assumptions I just outlined.

I should say that hermeneutics and linguistic analysis equally share the first assumption, namely that religious faith or experience may be identified on the basis of the language used. We shall see later, however, that hermeneutics qualifies this first assumption in a way which is proper to it. Nevertheless, this first assumption furnishes the common basis for a fruitful dialogue between the two approaches.

The second assumption, it seems to me, is common to a certain extent to both hermeneutics and linguistic analysis, at least to that brand of linguistic analysis which, with Austin and Wittgenstein, does not want to measure meaningfulness by the canons of artificial languages, or of ordinary language as reformulated according to logical rules, but which rather seeks to analyze the functioning of the different language games according to their own rules. Here too, we shall see how hermeneutics understands this methodological principle, that is, the requirement that the meaningfulness of a kind of discourse be measured by its own criteria of meaningfulness.

The main discrepancy between linguistic analysis and hermeneutics concerns without a doubt the third assumption. Linguistic analysis is so heavily determined by the history of the principles of verification and falsification that it is very difficult for this school of thought to conceive of a concept of truth which would not be taken for granted and defined a priori as *adequation*. The idea that each mode of fulfilment develops its own criteria of truth and that truth may mean not *adequation* but *manifestation* seems to be alien to the main thesis of linguistic analysis and more typical of hermeneutics, more or less influenced by Heideggerian philosophy. Nevertheless there are hints of this feeling concerning a necessary revision of the basic concept of truth in the work of Ian Ramsey and Frederick Ferré. But whatever may be the difference in approach, I do not think that it is too inaccurate to say that even this third assumption may become, if not a common presupposition, at least a common issue.

My purpose is not to refute the methodology of linguistic analysis, but merely to *clarify* the three assumptions of a philosophy of religious language following a hermeneutical method.

I

As I just said, the first assumption is common to both linguistic analysis and to hermeneutics. Both approach religious faith as *expressed in language*. But the difference of approach starts already at this level. Linguistic analysis readily starts with *statements* such as God exists, or God is immutable, all-powerful, and so forth—that is, from statements which clearly constitute a very sophisticated type of expression and which belong to a second-order discourse, that of theology. At this level religious discourse is reinterpreted in conceptual terms with the help of speculative philosophy. A hermeneutical philosophy, on the contrary, will try to get as close as possible to the most *originary* expressions of a community of faith, to those expressions through which the members of this community have interpreted their experience for the sake of themselves or for others' sake.

These documents of faith do not primarily contain theological statements, in the sense of metaphysical speculative theology, but expressions embedded in such modes of discourse as narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, proverbs and wisdom sayings, hymns, prayers, and

liturgical formulas. These are the ordinary expressions of religious faith. The first task of any hermeneutic is to identify these ordinary modes of discourse through which the religious faith of a community comes to language.

To serve this purpose a philosophical hermeneutics will provide certain specific methodological tools, aimed at the clarification of the notion of *modes* of discourse. It will first consider discourse as such, and describe its main traits, at least those which undergo a specific change when they are resumed and reshaped by the modes of discourse which we describe as narratives, proverbs, hymns, and so forth. Among these main traits the first feature to consider is the relation between the speech-act and its content, because this relation implies the most primitive dialectics of exteriorization and objectification on which the different modes of discourse will build the autonomy of the corresponding literary forms. What is said is already at a distance from the very act or event of saying. But a similar primary distance may be noticed between the discourse and its speaker, the inner structure and the outer referent, the discourse and its initial situation, and the discourse and its first audience. The problem of interpretation is already started. It does not begin with written texts, but with all these subtle dialectics of oral language which give a basis to the concept of modes of discourse.

The decisive step, however, occurs with the consideration of these modes of discourse themselves. Literary criticism calls them “literary genres.” I prefer to speak of modes of discourse, in order to emphasize their function in the production of discourse. By “genres,” literary criticism designates *classificatory* devices which help the critic to orient himself in the immense variety of individual works. The modes of discourse are more than means of classification—as the word “genre” seems to say—they are means of production, by this I mean instruments for producing discourse as a *work*. This aspect of discourse has not been considered enough by philosophers because it introduces categories into the field of language which belong to the field of practice, production, work. This, however, is precisely the case. Discourse as a work is organized in wholes of a second order, when compared to the sentence, which is the minimal unit of discourse. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle calls this fundamental category *taxis*—“composition”—which he places in the second place after the “invention of arguments”—*heuresis*—and before “diction”—*lexis*. Thanks to this *taxis*, to this “composition,” a text, whether oral or written, presents a texture and calls for an interpretation of its inner organization. Understanding a text is always something more than the summation of its partial meanings; the text as a whole has to be considered as a hierarchy of topics.

It is to this notion of a text as a work that I should relate the function of literary genres, or better, modes of discourse—narratives, proverbs, and so forth. In the same way as the grammatical codes have a *generative* function, to help generate discourse as a sentence, the literary codes too have a generative function. They serve to generate discourse as a narrative, a proverb, and so forth. In this sense, we need a generative poetics which would correspond at the level of the composition of discourse—of the Aristotelian *taxis*—to the generative grammar in Chomsky’s sense.

The main implication of this for hermeneutics would concern the new specific kinds of *distanciation* linked to the production of discourse as a work. A poem is a good example. But a narrative would serve the same purpose. A work of discourse, as a work of art, is an autonomous

object at a distance from the authorial intention, from its initial situation (its *Sitz im Leben*), and from its primitive audience. For this very reason it is open to an infinite range of interpretations. There is room for interpretation because the recovery of the initial event of discourse takes the form of a reconstruction starting from the structure and the inner organization of the specific modes of discourse. In other words, if hermeneutics is always an attempt to overcome a distance, it has to use distancing as both the obstacle and the instrument in order to reenact the initial event of discourse in a new event of discourse which will claim to be both faithful and creative.

Such is the hermeneutical way of treating our first assumption, namely that the religious faith of a community has to be identified through its language. In hermeneutical terms this means that the first task of a biblical hermeneut is to identify the different modes of discourse which, taken together, constitute the finite field of interpretation within the boundaries of which religious language may be understood. This task precedes that of a linguistic analysis applied to theological statements which have lost their rooting in these primary expressions of religious faith and which proceed from a reformulation of these primary expressions in a conceptual language of the same order as that of a speculative philosophy.

## II

If we assume the hermeneutical formulation of our first thesis—namely that religious experience comes to language through specific modes of discourse—we are prepared to clarify our second thesis according to the same line of thought.

It is not enough to say that religious language is meaningful, that it is not senseless, that it makes sense, that it has a meaning of its own, and so forth. We have to say that its meanings are ruled and guided by the modes of articulation specific to each mode of discourse. Here I reach the fundamental point of my lecture, which I will formulaic in the following way.

The “confession of faith” which is expressed in the biblical documents is inseparable from the *forms* of discourse, by which I mean the narrative structure; for example, the Pentateuch and the Gospels, the oracular structure of the prophecies, the parables, the hymn, and so forth. Not only does each form of discourse give rise to a style of confession of faith, but also the confrontation of these forms of discourse gives rise to tensions and contrasts, within the confession of faith itself, which are theologically significant. The opposition between narration and prophecy, so fundamental for the mentality of the Old Testament, is perhaps only one of the pairs of structures whose opposition contributes to engendering the global shape of its meaning. We shall speak later of other contrasting pairs at the level of literary genres. Perhaps we should even go so far as to consider the closing of the canon as a fundamental structural act which delimits the space for the interplay of forms of discourse and determines the finite configuration within which each form and each pair of forms unfolds its signifying function.

There are thus three problems to consider under the aegis of forms of biblical discourse: (1) the affinity between a form of discourse and a certain modality of the confession of faith; (2) the relation between a certain pair of structures (for example, narration and prophecy) and the corresponding tension in the theological message; and finally (3) the relation between the

configuration of the whole of the literary corpus and what one might correlatively call the space of interpretation opened by all the forms of discourse taken together.

I should say here that I am particularly indebted to Gerhard von Rad for the understanding of this relation between the form of discourse and the theological content, and that I find a confirmation of his method of correlation in similar works applied to the New Testament, especially those of Amos Wilder and William A. Beardslee.

The example of narration is perhaps the most striking, since it is also in the domain of narrative forms and structures that structural analysis has had its most brilliant success. This example, systematically developed, no longer allows us to construct theologies of the Old or New Testaments which understand the narrative category to be a rhetorical procedure alien to the content it carries. It seems, on the contrary, that something specific, something unique, is said about Jahweh and about his relations with his people Israel because it is said in the form of a narrative, of a story which recounts the events of deliverance in the past. The very concept of a “theology of traditions” which provides the title for the first volume of von Rad’s *Theology of the Old Testament* expresses the indissoluble solidarity of the confession of faith and the story. Nothing is said about God, or about man, or about their relations, which does not first of all reassemble legends and isolated sagas and rearrange them in meaningful sequences, so as to constitute a unique story, centered upon a kernel-event, which has both a historical import and a kerygmatic dimension. It is well known that Gerhard von Rad organizes the whole story from the basis of the primitive creed of Deuteronomy 26. This way of tying together the narrative dimension and the kerygmatic dimension is, for me, of the greatest importance.

On the one hand, taking the narrative structure into consideration in effect permits us to extend structural methods into the domain of exegesis. A comparison between von Rad and the structuralists trained in the school of Russian formalism and post-Saussurian semiology would be very interesting in this respect.

On the other hand, the relation between these two hermeneutics begins to reverse itself once we begin to consider the other side of the narrative, namely, the confession of faith. But this other dimension remains inseparable from the structure of the story. Not just any theology whatsoever can be tied to the narrative form, but only a theology which proclaims Jahweh to be the grand Actor of a history of deliverance. Without a doubt it is this point that forms the greatest contrast between the God of Israel and the God of Greek philosophy. The theology of traditions knows nothing of concepts of cause, foundation, or essence. It speaks of God in accord with the historical drama instituted by the acts of deliverance reported in the story. This manner of speaking of God is no less meaningful than that of the Greeks. It is a theology homogeneous with the narrative structure itself, a theology in the form of *Heilsgeschichte*.

I have developed here to some extent a single example, that of the narrative structure and the theological significations which correspond to it. The same should be done with the other literary forms in order to bring to light in theological discourse itself the tensions which correspond to the confrontation of the structures. The tension between narrative and prophecy is exemplary in this respect. The opposition of two literary forms—that of the chronicle and that of the oracle—is extended even to the perception of time, which the one consolidates and the other

dislocates, and even to the meaning of the divine, which alternatively seems to have the stability of the founding events of the history of the people, and to unfold the menace of deadly events. With prophecy, the creative dimension can only be attained beyond the valley of shadows: the God of the Exodus has to become the God of the Exile if he is to remain the God of the future and not only the God of memory.

I will not say more about this in the limited framework of this lecture. It would be necessary to explore other forms of discourse and perhaps other significant contrasts, for example, that of legislation and wisdom, or that of the hymn and the proverb. Throughout these discourses, God appears differently each time: sometimes as the hero of the saving act, sometimes as wrathful and compassionate, sometimes as he to whom one can speak in a relation of an I-Thou type, or sometimes as he whom I meet only in a cosmic order which ignores me.

Perhaps an exhaustive enquiry, if one were possible, would disclose that all these forms of discourse together constitute a circular system and that the theological content of each one of them receives its signification from the total constellation of forms of discourse. Religious language would then appear as a polyphonic language sustained by the circularity of the forms. But perhaps this hypothesis is unverifiable and confers on the closing of the canon a sort of necessity which would not be appropriate to what should perhaps remain a historical accident of the text. At least this hypothesis is coherent with the central theme of this analysis, that the finished work which we call the Bible is a limited space for interpretation in which the theological significations are correlatives of forms of disclosure. It is no longer possible to interpret the significations without making the long detour through a structural explication of the forms.

### III

Let me now say something about the third presupposition of a philosophy of religious language, namely, that it develops specific claims to truth measured by *criteria* appropriate to this kind of discourse. Here too, a philosophical hermeneutics paves the way to a more specific treatment of religious expressions, documents, and texts.

The category which has to be introduced here is that of *the world of the text*. This notion prolongs—but at the level of complex works of discourse—what I earlier called the reference of discourse. Let me remind you of the distinction introduced by Gottlob Frege at the level of simple propositions between the sense and the reference. The sense of the meaning is the ideal object which is intended. This meaning is purely immanent to discourse. The reference is the truth value of the proposition, its claim to reach reality. Through this character discourse is opposed to language which has no relationship with reality. Words refer to other words in the round without end of the dictionary. Only discourse, we say, intends things, is applied to reality, expresses the world.

The new question that arises is the following. What happens to the reference when discourse becomes a text? It is here that writing and above all the structure of the work alter the reference to the point of rendering it entirely problematic. In oral discourse the problem is ultimately resolved by the ostensive function of discourse. In other words, the reference is

resolved by the power of showing a reality common to the interlocuters. Or if we cannot show the thing being talked about, at least we can situate it in relation to a unique spatial-temporal network to which the interlocuters also belong. It is this network, here and now determined by the discourse situation, which furnishes the ultimate reference of all discourse.

With writing, things begin to change. There is no longer a common situation between the writer and the reader. And at the same time, the concrete conditions for the act of pointing something out no longer exist. Without a doubt it is this abolition of the demonstrative or denotative characteristics of reference which makes possible the phenomenon which we call literature, where every reference to the given reality may be abolished. But it is essentially with the appearance of certain literary genres, generally tied to writing, but not necessarily so, that this abolition of reference to the given world is led to its most extreme conditions. It is the role of most of our literature, it would seem, to destroy this world. This is true of fictional literature—fairy tales, myths, novels, drama—but also of all literature which we can call poetic literature, where the language seems to glorify itself without depending on the referential function of ordinary discourse.

And yet if such fictional discourse does not rejoin ordinary reality, it still refers to another more fundamental level than that attained by descriptive, assertive, or didactic discourse which we call ordinary language. My thesis here is that the abolition of first-order reference, an abolition accomplished by fiction and poetry, is the condition of possibility for the liberation of a second order of reference which reaches the world not only at the level of manipulable objects, but at the level Husserl designated by the expression *Lebenswelt*, and which Heidegger calls being-in-the-world.

It is this referential dimension which is absolutely original with fictional and poetic works which, for me, poses the most fundamental hermeneutical problem. If we can no longer define hermeneutics as the search for another person and psychological intentions which hide behind the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the identification of structures, what remains to be interpreted? My response is that to interpret is to explicate the sort of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text.

Here we rejoin Heidegger's suggestion about the meaning of *Verstehen*. It will be remembered that, in *Being and Time*, the theory of understanding is not tied to the comprehension of others, but becomes a structure of being-in-the-world. More precisely, it is a structure which is examined after the structure of *Befindlichkeit*, state of mind, has been introduced. The moment of understanding responds dialectically to being in a situation, as the projection of our ownmost possibilities in those situations where we find ourselves. I want to take this idea of the "projection of our ownmost possibilities" from his analysis and apply it to the theory of the text. In effect, what is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities. This is what I call the world of the text, the world probably belonging to this unique text.

The world of the text of which we are speaking is not therefore the world of everyday language. In this sense it constitutes a new sort of distancing which we can call a distancing of the real from itself. It is this distancing that fiction introduces into our apprehension of

reality. A story, a fairy tale, or a poem does not lack a referent. Through fiction and poetry new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, but not through the modality of givenness, but rather through the modality of possibility. And in this way everyday reality is metamorphosed by means of what we would call the imaginative variations that literature works on the real.

Among other poetical expression, fiction is the privileged path to the redescription of reality and poetic language is that language which above all effects what Aristotle, in his consideration of tragedy, called the *mimesis* of reality. Tragedy, in effect, only imitates reality because it recreates it by means of a *mythos*, a fable which reaches its deepest essence.

Now let us apply this notion of a world of the text to some specific religious texts, say biblical texts. In doing so, I propose to say that, for a philosophical approach, religious texts are kinds of poetic texts: they offer modes of redescribing life, but in such a way that they are differentiated from other forms of poetic texts.

Let me follow the route of what must appear at first sight to be a simple “application” to biblical texts of a hermeneutic of poetic texts. This “application,” far from submitting biblical hermeneutics to an alien law, restores it to itself and delivers it from several illusions. First, it delivers us from the temptation of prematurely introducing existential categories of understanding to counterbalance the eventual excesses of structural analysis. Our general hermeneutics invites us to say that the necessary stage between structural explanation and self-understanding is the unfolding of the world of the text. It is this latter which finally forms and transforms the selfhood of the reader according to its intention. The theological implications here are considerable: the first task of hermeneutics is not to give rise to a decision on the part of the reader; but to allow the world of being which is the “issue” of the biblical text to unfold. Thus, above and beyond emotions, disposition, belief, or nonbelief, is the proposition of a world which in the biblical language is called a new world, a new covenant, the kingdom of God, a new birth. These are the realities unfolded before the text, which are certainly for us, but which begin from the text. This is what one might call the “objectivity” of the new being projected by the text.

A second implication is this: to put the “issue” of the text before everything else is to cease to ask the question of the inspiration of the writings in the psychologizing terms of an insufflation of meaning to an author which projects itself into the text. If the Bible can be said to be revealed, this ought to be said of the “issue” that it speaks of—the new being which is displayed there. I would go so far as to say that the Bible is revealed to the extent that the new being unfolded there is itself revelatory with respect to the world, to all of reality, including my existence and my history. In other words, revelation, if the expression is meaningful, is a trait of the biblical *world*.

Now this world is not immediately carried by psychological intentions, but mediately by the structures of the work. All that we have said above about the relations between, for example, the narrative form of the signification of Jahweh as the actor, or about relations of the form of prophecy with the signification of the Lord as menace and promise beyond destruction, constitutes the sole possible introduction to what we are now calling the biblical world. The

power of the most powerful revelation is born in the contrast and the convergence of all the forms of discourse taken together.

A third theological implication of the category of the world of the text: because it is here a question of a world, in the sense of a global horizon, of a totality of meanings, there is no privilege whatsoever for an instruction addressed to the individual person, and in general none for personal aspects, in the form of I-Thou or in general in the relation of man to God. The biblical world has aspects which are cosmic (it is a creation), which are communitarian (it speaks of a people), which are historical and cultural (it speaks of Israel and the kingdom of God), and which are personal. Man is reached through a multiplicity of dimensions which are as much cosmological and historical and worldly as they are anthropological, ethical, and personal.

The fourth theological application of the category of the world of the text: We have said above that the world of the “literary” text is a projected world which is poetically distant from our everyday reality. Is not the new being projected and proposed by the Bible a case par excellence of this trait? Does not the new being make its journey through the world of ordinary experience and in spite of the closedness of this experience? Is not the force of this projected world a force of rupture and of opening? If this is so, must we not accord to this projected world the *poetic* dimension, in the strong sense of the word, the poetic dimension which we have acknowledged of the issue of the text?

Pursuing this line of reasoning to its logical conclusions, must we not say that what is thus opened up in everyday reality is another reality, the reality of the *possible*? Let us recall at this point one of Heidegger’s most valuable remarks on *Verstehen*: for him *Verstehen* is diametrically opposed to *Befindlichkeit* in the measure that *Verstehen* is addressed to our ownmost possibilities and deciphers them in a situation which cannot be projected because we are already thrown into it. In theological language this means that “the kingdom of God is coming,” that is, it appeals to our ownmost possibilities beginning from the very meaning of this kingdom, which does not come from us.

The route which we have followed thus far is that of the application of a general hermeneutical category to the biblical hermeneutic seen as a regional hermeneutic. My thesis is that this route is the only one at whose end we can recognize the specificity of the biblical “issue.” In this Gerhard Ebeling is correct: it is only in listening to this book to the very end, as one book among many, that we can encounter it as the Word of God. But once again, this recognition does not appeal to a psychological concept of inspiration, as though its authors repeated a word which was whispered in their ears. This recognition is addressed to the quality of the new being as it announces itself.

One of the traits which makes for the specificity of the biblical discourse, as we all know, is the central place of God-reference in it. The result of our earlier analysis is that the signification of this reference of biblical discourse is implicated, in a special way which we have yet to describe, in the multiple unified significations of the literary forms of narration, prophecy, hymn, wisdom, and so forth. “God-talk,” to use John McQuarries’s phrase, proceeds from the concurrence and convergence of these partial discourses. The God-referent is at once the

coordinator of these varied discourses and the index of their incompleteness, the point at which something escapes them.

In this sense, the word “God” does not function as a philosophical concept, whether this be being either in the medieval or the Heideggerian sense of being. Even if one is tempted to say—in the theological metalanguage of all these pretheological languages—that “God” is the religious name for being, still the word “God” says more: it presupposes the total context constituted by the whole space of gravitation of stories, prophecies, laws, hymns, and so forth. To understand the word “God” is to follow the direction of the meaning of the word. By the direction of the meaning I mean its double power to gather all the significations which issue from the partial discourses and to open up a horizon which escapes from the closure of discourse.

I would say the same thing about the word “Christ.” To the double function which I have described for the word “God,” this word “Christ” adds the power of incarnating all the religious significations in a fundamental symbol, the symbol of a sacrificial love, of a love stronger than death. It is the function of the preaching of the Cross and Resurrection to give to the word “God” a *density* which the word “being” does not possess. In its meaning is contained the notion of *its* relation to us as gracious, and of *our* relation to it as “ultimately concerned” and as fully “re-cognizant” of it.

It will thus be the task of biblical hermeneutics to unfold all these implications of this constitution and of this articulation of God-talk.

We can now see in what sense this biblical hermeneutics is at once a particular case of the sort of general hermeneutics described here and at the same time a unique case. It is a particular case of a more general enterprise because the new being of which the Bible speaks is not to be sought anywhere but in the word of this text which is one text among others. It is a unique case because all the partial discourses are referred to a name which is the point of intersection and the index of incompleteness of all our discourse about God, and because this name has become bound up with the *meaning-event* preached as Resurrection. But biblical hermeneutics can only claim to say something unique if this unique thing speaks as the world of the text which is addressed to us, as the issue of the text.

To conclude this lecture I should like to make a suggestion concerning the concept of religious faith which we have not considered in itself, but through its linguistic and literary expressions. For a hermeneutical philosophy, faith never appears as an immediate experience, but always as mediated by a certain language which articulates it. For my part I should link the concept of faith to that of *self-understanding* in the face of the text. Faith is the attitude of one who accepts being interpreted at the same time that he interprets the world of the text. Such is the hermeneutical constitution of the biblical faith.

In thus recognizing the hermeneutical constitution of the biblical faith, we are resisting all psychologizing reductions of faith. This is not to say that faith is not authentically an *act* which cannot be reduced to linguistic treatment. In this sense, faith is the limit of all hermeneutics and the nonhermeneutical origin of all interpretation. The ceaseless movement of interpretation begins and ends in the risk of a response which is neither engendered nor exhausted by

commentary. It is in taking account of this prelinguistic or hyperlinguistic characteristic that faith could be called “ultimate concern,” which speaks of the laying hold of the necessary and unique thing from whose basis I orient myself in all my choices. It has also been called a “feeling of absolute dependence” to underscore the fact that it responds to an initiative which always precedes me. Or it could be called “unconditional trust” to say that it is inseparable from a movement of hope which makes its way in spite of the contradictions of experience and which turns reasons for despair into reasons for hope according to the paradoxical laws of a logic of superabundance. In all these traits the thematic of faith escapes from hermeneutics and testifies to the fact that the latter is neither the first nor the last word.

But hermeneutics reminds us that biblical faith cannot be separated from the movement of interpretation which elevates it into language. “Ultimate concern” would remain mute if it did not receive the power of a word of interpretation ceaselessly renewed by signs and symbols which have, we might say, educated and formed this concern over the centuries. The feeling of absolute dependence would remain a weak and marcultured sentiment if it were not the response to the proposition of a new being which opens new possibilities of existence for me. Hope, unconditional trust, would be empty if it did not rely on a constantly renewed interpretation of sign-events reported by the writings, such as the Exodus in the Old Testament and the Resurrection in the New Testament. These are the events of deliverance which open and disclose the utmost possibilities of my own freedom and thus become for me the Word of God. Such is the properly hermeneutical constitution of faith.