point; rather it is a beginning. But it is a beginning that the development of ordinary theological literacy, were it to develop in GenXers, would not render superfluous since, ultimately, the point of all religious texts is to bring the person or community into deeper communion with God and fuller participation in God's project in the world.

Theological literacy, as traditionally understood, may not get very far with many GenXers, but for the ones who are spiritual seekers and who are making the psychological transition from preadulthood to adulthood, helping them connect with a fundamental spiritual practice may provide the window of accessibility they need in order to develop, over time, a hunger for the texts of this religion of the Book.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Theological Literacy: Problem and Promise

WESLEY J. WILDMAN

For our purposes we can divide theological literacy into two types. On the one hand, theological literacy can mean knowing enough theological terminology to express one's beliefs. This kind of literacy can promote discussion among believers, clarify what is at stake in arguments, and deepen the sense of belonging to a religious tradition. It is valuable for all these reasons, especially for religious people interested in beginning to think about their faith. I will call this "theological literacy A," but this type of literacy is not my concern here. On the other hand, theological literacy can mean knowing how to *think* theologically. This skill is rarer, harder to achieve, more disturbing (since such thinking often interferes with existing convictions), and less obviously valuable for most people. This is the sort of theological literacy of which David Tracy speaks in this volume and of which I mean to speak here. I will call it "theological literacy B," using the phrase "theological literacy" for this second type unless the context demands clarification.

Theological literacy of this second type is promising because it promotes understanding, transformation, intellectual honesty, spiritual realism, and moral responsibility. It is also a problem, however, because it is hard to cultivate and because having it can cause distress and lead to alienation from one's religious community. I shall describe both sides of the theological literacy coin on the way to fleshing out this description in terms of suggestions both for the theological training of religious leaders and for professional theological work. I turn first to the problematic wing, beginning with an argument about the relevance and attractiveness of theological literacy.

The Problem of Theological Literacy

There are lots of ways to get from A to Z in life, and on our many and various paths, most of us human beings manage. Our problems have mostly to do with love, resources, safety, justice, microorganisms, misfiring immune systems, and neurochemical imbalances. These problems take most of our attention. Being theologically literate is, on a first approximation, a luxury that is irrelevant to the vast majority of human lives. It is not that theological literacy leads to terrible mistakes; on the contrary, it can produce genuine insight. It is rather that life for most people is not about understanding but about coping, and theological literacy offers too little in the way of coping power to compensate for the time and trouble that acquiring it involves. To be clear: I am not saying that most people *perceive* theological literacy as an irrelevant luxury; I am saying that it *really is* an irrelevant luxury for most people. Thus we are faced not merely with a public relations challenge to increase interest in theological literacy, but also with a reasonably accurate judgment of the masses: theological literacy is irrelevant to them. Sure, a cultural elite needs to keep theological literacy alive or else public discourse would be awash in the sort of stupid superficiality that dominates any public debate in the absence of sharp, confusion-free clarity for which cultural elites strive. It follows that we need *some* theological experts to keep the flame of thought burning beneath the essentially religious, existentially potent questions that keep coming up in human experience. But that is as far as the relevance of theological literacy goes for most people. As long as we know that someone is holding down the theological fort, the literature fort, the science fort, the economics fort, and so on, we can safely get on with our lives, reasonably confident that we can leave complicated questions to experts.

So much for relevance; now to attractiveness. Theological literacy is arguably no boon but a bane, directing people's attention to the true yet disturbing underbelly of life that is, frankly, better handled for most by religion's relatively gracious and effective soothings and distractions. Religious acts, from communal worship to centering meditation, get people back on track, keep them moving through life with dignity and forbearance. Social work and simple caring for others grease the creaky joints of the social body and keep alive the flickering prophetic flame for times when disasters of justice require it. Religious ways of understanding and acting provide orientation and comfort and thereby silently legitimate many unconsciously held assumptions that are crucial for the stability of societies and for individual happiness. All these beneficial effects of religion are strongest when we are both unaware of the social and cognitive mechanisms that produce them and unlearned about the world as it is that re-

quires religion for that production process. Theological literacy is a problem because it raises consciousness, disrupting the silent and relatively effective functioning of religion in individual and corporate life. It is, in short, unattractive as well as irrelevant for most people. Of course, the elites who turn their attention to theological matters find the object of their attentions utterly attractive, sometimes to the point of obsession. That is understandable; theological thought systems at their best are majestic cultural achievements, powerfully synthetic and directly applicable to the many agonizing struggles of human life — a fact that would surprise many people, though no competent theologian. Knowing all that, however, makes theological literacy not one whit more attractive to most people. It is enough for most people to know that someone will dance with the theological wallflower; we each have our own romances with life under way that demand our energy and devotion.

There is one exquisitely painful aspect of this unattractiveness that is understood only by those who dabble in theology. To have one's hearing attuned by theological literacy and the study of religion to the point that the silent orienting and legitimating function of religion becomes persistently audible is to deconstruct some of the enjoyable and even precious processes in one's own spiritual life. Like a never ending stage whisper, it seriously disrupts the ability of religious practices to weave a mood of wonder. Of course, the loss of first naïveté in this way is not the tragedy; Paul Ricoeur was correct that a second naïveté can be achieved in which one draws the everlasting stage whisper of criticism into one's participation in the activity of the play. The tragedy is the loss of corporate fluency associated with first naïveté, which is never recovered in the usually highly individualistic second naïveté. Many who pass through the mysterious archway of theological literacy shrink from pressing farther into its wondrous halls for exactly this reason. This occurs in beginning seminary students, for example, whose theological fears are due not merely to a lack of seriousness about spiritual matters — though it is sometimes partly that — but also to a prescient intuition that loss of social fluency and then alienation might be some of the fruits of their striving to become theologically literate. It is a healthy reaction. I would look upon people who did not shrink from such a prospect with a suspicious curiosity and wager that they can be so cavalier about social alienation only because social fluency was never a notable feature of their lives, leaving them little to lose.

There is a general cultural need for specialists in theology (along with literature and sociology and all other special studies). This need is focused especially by the fact that certain religious or academic groups have a special interest in supporting the study of things theological, furnishing resources and communities with which to do it. Accordingly, none of what I have said

amounts to a case against theological literacy per se. It does, however, constitute a strong argument both against conceiving of theological literacy as a desirable goal for most people and against a policy of theological literacy for everyone. Islam understands that theological literacy is a luxury most people can ill afford because it is mostly irrelevant and unattractive. A relatively unhierarchical religion, Islam expresses its strong interest in supporting the lives of believers when it accords its relatively few theologians lowly status and instead throws its intellectual energy into the cultivation of intricate systems of law that help keep social life flowing smoothly, or at least justly.

So much for the relation between theological literacy and the general public, including most practicing religious people. But what about those church or synagogue folk who turn out for an adult education series on some theological topic (a small percentage of the membership)? What about the people who seek out books on religious topics because they want to educate themselves? Well, we takes what we can gets, as Popeye used to say. Such people range on a continuum from those having a passing interest in theological matters or feeling an urgent need to sort out theologically a crisis in their lives, to those who are curious enough to make theological literacy an avocation or even a profession. Supporting such interests makes good sense. If we give up the vain illusion that theological literacy should be for everyone in exchange for the more modest goal that means of achieving theological literacy should be available for anyone who wants to cultivate it, we are, I think, on firmer ground.

With this relatively relaxed approach to theological literacy in mind, it is interesting to note that there are many opportunities for cultivating theological literacy in simple ways. For example, common religious practices from pastoral care to sharing groups or Bible studies, though they do not in themselves necessarily involve much theological reflection, can sometimes lead into serious theological territory. Yet there is a problem here that needs to be brought into the open: full advantage can rarely be taken of such opportunities because good theological reflection is quite tricky. Consider the Bible study that usually involves relating texts read to personal life situations, an environment ideal for spiritual growth and building a sense of group cohesion. Such practices presuppose an enormous amount of theologically loaded connective material, without which it would be impossible to move so freely from an ancient text to people's living concerns in a very different cultural context. Actually being able to identify those theological assumptions usually is not important; the vital point is that they are shared by the group, thereby making possible higher-level corporate processes that build a sense of mutual belonging and help to establish or confirm each individual's beliefs. People who are too curious or argumentative about those assumptions are correctly felt to disrupt the group's optimal function and understandably are regarded affectionately as mavericks or — in extreme cases — even shunned. Occasionally, though, some theological assumptions are flushed into the open and become the topic of discussion.

If such a group reads the book of Job together, for instance, it would be understandable if the conversation turned to suffering or even to the nature of God — bona fide theological topics. But then there is a problem. Few will notice the contradiction between the God of literary convenience at the beginning and the God that defies description at the end of Job. The concluding portrayal of the abysmal, unapproachable divine discloses the literary fiction of a God who makes deals and plays with lives as a self-righteous, amoral being, worthy only of guarded respect and no love. Fewer will know enough about competing interpretations of suffering in human intellectual history to be able to assess Job's portrayal. And very few indeed will be interested in discerning that their own views of God and suffering are probably diagnosed in this book as inadequate, failing to register the dark, chaotic underside of the divine, trimming off the nasty bits that a Calvin or an Edwards understood in order to make God more palatable to current tastes. Serious theology always plays havoc with our deepest convictions, leaving no stone of concept or motivation unturned; it is a spiritually draining, intellectually demanding activity requiring learning and devotion that is capable of taking one past the pain of cognitive disruption. In spite of all these limitations of experience and insight, all in our hypothetical group will be fascinated. The conversation will be passionate; most will have something to say about how these momentous questions bear on their lives; and many will be left with a longing for more exploration of their fundamental assumptions, though simultaneously probably in dismay over their lack of resources to do that. Somehow, the people in this not-so-imaginary example are able to experience theological reflection as intriguing, yet the properly disturbing effects of ordinary theological reflection remain mostly unencountered and probably undesired.

Theological literacy, like science literacy or literacy in any complex subject, is hard to achieve. So why do the real consequences of serious theology take so long to manifest themselves? Why do novices think they are further along in theology than they really are? In this respect, the situation is quite unlike science literacy. A good science journalist can set a reader more or less on the right track fairly quickly without having to get into the amazingly complex details, yet the novice reader knows full well how far he or she is from being expert. The situation in theology is more akin to mathematics perhaps, in which serious work has almost nothing to do with the arithmetic and geometry with which one begins and in which there is almost no possibility of conveying the meaning of a specialized theorem for a general audience. Even before the begin-

ning of a serious effort to become theologically literate, interested people probably already have had many theological thoughts and have tried to educate themselves with ready-at-hand resources. Their thoughts probably will have been disorganized and superficial from a theologically sophisticated point of view, yet their questions may have been the profound ones asked by seasoned theologians. It takes most theological students some time to discern both the senses in which their questions are truly profound and the superficiality of their former thinking. For sometime at the beginning, theological terminology and ways of thinking serve only to reattire existing convictions — that is partly what theological literacy A is about. The weight of theological wisdom takes time to be felt; it is like cultivating the continual awareness of one's own breath. It is not uncommon to hear advanced seminary students or even seasoned ministers offer theological reflections that extend little further, apart from terminological reclothing, than their poorly informed novice speculations would have taken them. Typically, many years of work are required before a novice's theological thinking passes over from the merely inspirational and confirmatory into being a potent force for transformation of one's deepest assumptions about reality. Moreover, though the novice theological learner may soundly intuit that a kind of alienation from the religious community awaits, the true difficulty of gaining theological literacy is not appreciated at all by beginners.

This point goes not to the unattractiveness of theological literacy but rather to the question of its feasibility as a goal for any but those aiming for a high level of competence. It also bears on the pedagogical challenge of making resources available to those who are interested in cultivating theological literacy. Both of these issues lead directly to the "Why bother?" question. Why bother to make available resources for cultivating theological literacy B at the basic level? Helping people merely to reexpress and then to confirm their existing beliefs through speaking about them differently — the most common consequence — is of dubious value. Perhaps we should not bother with theological education unless those who undertake it intend to go all the way, as it were. Or perhaps there is so-far-undiagnosed promise in theological literacy at the elementary level, the problems I have described notwithstanding. I think there is promise in theological literacy, though I believe it has challenging implications for theological and educational practice, as I hope to show.

The Promise of Theological Literacy

While worshiping recently in a mainline Protestant congregation, I heard a sermon that catalyzed for me the problem and promise of theological literacy. The

preacher was working with the Acts account of the murder of Stephen. The wider context was the Colorado school shooting in April 1999 that so many within and beyond this congregation had found extremely disturbing. The Eucharist was to follow the sermon. It was a dramatic moment, at least for those attuned to the dynamic counterpoint of liturgy. One way or another, this sermon was going to lead us from dismay and anxiety to the eucharistic meal. What would the preacher say?

The message of the sermon was simple enough. We were encouraged to be more active sustainers of our own spiritual lives, thereby making ourselves both more resistant to the rancorous infighting (it *was* infighting, relatively speaking) that led to Stephen's death and better placed to heal a nation in uncomprehending dismay over its own children slaughtering each other. A lively spiritual depth is the key to love and healing, and the precondition for unity in religion and harmony in society. And the Eucharist is the place at which we are loved and healed, the source of the courage needed to love and heal in less safe territory.

I was grateful for the message. Upon reflection, I thought it probably comforted people in that congregation and gave them a constructive way of thinking about what might be done differently, albeit indirectly, to make a difference in the United States. It proclaimed an aspect of the Eucharist's meaning, held out the possibility of love and healing, and reminded congregants to take full and serious responsibility for what they could, beginning with their own lives.

Though the issues at stake are pregnant with both social and theological implications, the sermon contained no significant social or theological analysis. And why should it? The papers and pundits were full of social analyses, mostly insightful, that comforted no one. Those analyses in themselves changed nothing and had little impact on decisions made by schools and communities in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings; people's anxiety determined most of those policy adjustments. Why go through social analyses in a sermon? I think the preacher's judgment on that score was right on target, at least as far as meeting the needs of listeners on that occasion is concerned.

Theology might be even less promising territory for explicit sermonic exploration in this instance. Where do you turn? To Psalm-like complaints about the absence of divine intervention as the trigger squeezes? To Job-like accusations of mysterious divine standoffishness while children plunge into insane violence and social life screams down the cliff of culture wars and teenage disillusionment? To desperately wry observations of the late, safe divine arrival in the speeches of condemnation and the comforting of bereft parents in the arms of friends and siblings of the dead? To cheap speechifying about an ideal Christian social order? To the intransigence of sin and the uncontrollable emergence

within complex societies of unintended effects? Or if we throw safety to the winds, refusing to immunize God from actual human suffering, should we turn instead to easy analogies with the murder of Jesus — Colorado sacrifices for the raising of consciousness? To divine judgment on societies rife with heartless overconsumption and cultural arrogance conjoined with video-game brain training in the ways of killing from an early age? Or do we forget divine action and theodicy and travel the routes of nonstandard theologies? We could deny that God is a living force who wants and acts in particular ways, which then necessarily leaves us in control of our own affairs. We could proclaim the gospel of deism wherein God creates a natural and moral order once and then leaves us to it, wondrous creatures threading our way through a glorious maze. We could promote God the great persuader, who is so impotent that divine inspiration is about the best we can expect.

My bet is that few in that congregation wanted to hear any of this. Everyone wanted to be comforted, everyone wanted to fix things, everyone wanted to understand why it happened, and everyone wanted to understand how God fitted into that tragic picture. But no one wanted actually to discover what is found by all theologians who keep working on the how-God-fits-into-the-picture question; namely, that we invent images of God to make ourselves feel better about our lives and that no one really knows much about the answer to the how-God-fits-into-the-picture question. We are left with acts of worshipful surrender, the strange world of the Bible (including David's psalmic complaining to God and Job's abandonment), and our own sweetly agonizing personal journeys through life's suffering, joys, and accidents. God is present as absence, as the blissful source of love, as the abysmal undoing of us all, as the fecund depths from which every chaotic and creative force emerges. Most people don't want decisive confirmation of their deep suspicions about how little we control, how noisily we cover our lack of knowledge, and how vainly we struggle against the limits on our existence. Nothing drives home those uncomfortable realizations more effectively than serious theology. It doesn't matter what the tradition or religion; when we think deeply and systematically about our situation and what it must mean about its fundamental nature, including divinity — in short, when we do serious theology — we always end up at roughly the same family of insights under various descriptions: we don't know much, we can't control much, we make things up to comfort ourselves, and we deny it all in amazingly sophisticated ways. How do you preach that? Who can blame the preacher for focusing the Columbine message on spiritual growth and change and bypassing social and theological analysis?

The problem with comforting sermons that challenge us in desirably limited ways is that most people know, deep down, not to believe them completely.

The reason for this is the same reason that theology consistently leads to a wilder, more unspeakably wondrous conception of God: our experience demands it. We might not want to know the truth but, when reality bites and we are face-to-face with the unmanageability of untamed divinity, only the comfort of truth will do. Suffering unmasks religion, its useful fictions and its comforting distractions, but it also drives us to the deep power of religion, to the secret it treasures and protects, to the fragile heart of human togetherness that is always at some level a blessed huddling-around-the-fire-against-the-dark companionship. At those moments when our hearts are laid bare, only two things matter, and in a very important order. First, we need to survive, to get through it. For that, nothing is better than the loving support of friends and family. Second, we need to understand, and to understand differently than we are given to understand in the usual course of events. Our questions are the same as ever but kaleidoscopically rearranged by the absolute conviction of the futility of simply comforting answers; only the searing heat of truth can comfort when normalcy is unmasked. Once touched by this curiosity, I think, few are satisfied ever again with the soothing comfort of religious distractions, and they learn to see the deeper truths to which religious practices point.

Here we come, then, to the promise of theological literacy. Far beyond merely giving people new words to strengthen their defenses against life's translucency to divine power, theology can speak the truth that life is at the mercy of the divine. Theology introduces its serious students to traditions of thought in which the unspeakable mystery is only ever named in anticipation of the collapse of all words, to traditions of poetry and disciplined argumentation, to careful distinctions and brilliant metaphors that express the unending wonders of the divine. Those students are invited to engage this mystery with every ounce of heart, soul, mind, and strength, not merely for the comfort of simple, confirming insights, but for the sake of the love of life's greatest enigma, God — though he slay me, yet will I trust in him. When only the truth will do, nothing has the potential to unmask, to transform, and to evoke responsibility like theology.

Consequences for Theological Education

The parent bereft of a young teenage child meets with the rabbi. The rabbi is skillful. Knowing how to listen and speak in time with the cross-rhythms of grief and fury, the rabbi wins trust, and there is nothing more sacred in such moments. The grieving parent wants to understand — not to know why, as if life's contingencies answer to our demands, but to know how to live in a world with such proportions, and to know how to love and trust a creator God whose

own character must be configured in the world's. This parent needs to know and so implicitly entrusts the rabbi with longings and despair, with suspicions about a social fabric full of constructed comforts and valuable distractions, with a simple plea for understanding supported by an instinctive confidence that an offer of evasive comfort will be easy to detect and spurn. Heart in hand, this parent wants to know if it is really so, if the world really is as he or she now thinks it must be. The rabbi has a choice: comfort with half-truths or earn the trust that has been offered.

The question for those interested in theological literacy is whether the rabbi is ready to let the truth be seen unmasked for a moment, configured in the shape of this tragic loss. If survival of the parent were the only goal, it wouldn't matter much what the rabbi did so long as love that binds was able to flow between these two people. But understanding is also the goal in this case, and no amount of communal support can cause understanding to come forth. Only serious theology will do. A rabbi who is not seriously theologically literate will fail both to earn the trust already won with pastoral skills and to diagnose the reason for this failure. In fact, such a rabbi will probably fail even to notice that trust has been squandered in the name of conventional comforts, not least because the grieving parent will doubtless be somewhat comforted by conventional answers even as, with an elusive feeling of confusion, he or she realizes that something is wrong. Of course something is wrong: theological dullness at best and personal betrayal at worst. Without theological literacy — serious theological literacy — moments of trust like this can never be earned. With it, however, the rabbi has the chance to bring the greatest comfort of all, to let the glory of God be glimpsed in this moment as from the cleft of a rock. Such a vision immeasurably deepens the perception of the grieving parent through confirming the unspoken instincts that drive the urge to know the truth.

The rabbi, the pastor, the priest, the cleric, the monk, the guru — will they be ready? Have they been freed by serious theology from their own intoxication with being professional religious gatekeepers, released from their entrapment in endless circles of sophisticated denial and ritual comforts, liberated from the chains of vain God-concepts and ready answers that soothe the answerer as much as the answered? Theological literacy by itself cannot cause such wisdom and readiness, but without serious immersion in theology it is almost impossible to achieve. The goal of making theological literacy available to those who seek it requires religious leaders who are themselves seriously theologically literate — local theologians who know that theology discloses a God who undoes our pretensions to divine knowledge and patiently defies our convenient systems of ideas. At least three conditions need to be met in theological education if religious leaders are to have such readiness.

First, theological education of religious leaders must aim for more than mere knowledge of theological terminology and history, which is the bread and butter of theological literacy A. The ability to think theologically — theological literacy B — presupposes such knowledge but requires in addition the curiosity and persistence of determined inquiry. Every presupposition must be called into question as needed, and arguments must be constructed to support new configurations of assumptions. The guidance of tradition should be just that, guidance, and no pretense should be made that a historical formulation of doctrine is somehow timeless; all historical-cultural formulations are necessarily limited, and even more so when the topic is the divine.

Second, theological education of religious leaders must aim to be constructive, applying theological resources to new problems and also to familiar problems in new contexts. Each person must think for himself or herself, making a unique path through the complex theological terrain, checked along the way by all the well-known landmarks by which all theological adventurers travel. In so journeying, careful attention must be paid to context, which conditions both which formulations count as relevant and what conceptual and cultural resources are available for theological reflection.

Third, theological education of religious leaders must aim to evoke spiritual alertness. The skills of inquiry and independent, context-sensitive thinking are not enough by themselves to make a religious leader ready to open up the truth for people when those extraordinary moments of trust occur. It is necessary also to sense what matters, to detect the heart of an issue, to be revolted or delighted by the unexpected. Spiritual alertness conjoined with theological literacy causes everything in life and ministry to be seen differently. The toothpaste section of the typical Western supermarket aisle with its unending varieties might induce sudden nausea, and the deformed child at play, a blast of joy — experiences supported immediately by the capacity to analyze those reactions in theological terms. There is so much hiding from our dependence on nature in that excessive display of toothpaste (or hair colors or bread varieties or breakfast cereals), and the blessed triumph of simple fun in the face of limitations sings through the child at play. Spiritual alertness is, for the theologically literate, the prospector's metal detector and the bloodhound's nose.

Consequences for Theological Work

A member of the general public does not expect to be able to read with much understanding any specialized academic work. Such works are highly conventional, conditioned and actually enabled by densely elaborated semiotic codes

into which novices must initiate themselves for years before they can make a contribution at the cutting edge of debate. This is as true in theology as in the humanities or the social and natural sciences. Yet there is wonder in these specialized academic studies, springs of delight that would remain more or less secret were it not for a breed of communicators who spread the word as journalists or as the authors of popular and semipopular books. The largest and most adept group of popular communicators presents the secrets of the natural sciences to the general public, but there are smaller groups working with medicine, archaeology, psychology, religion, and so on. The group of popular writers trying to present theology and the Bible for the general public, especially Christians, is actually very large. Specialized Christian bookstores exist to promote and distribute such books, and many magazines and other periodicals do the same.

This body of popular work has several notable features, on average — though this is the result of my own impressions and not of a scientifically thorough survey. Most material is written by and for conservative evangelical or fundamentalist Christians. Much of it is intended to help people relate Christian insights to everyday matters of life and faith. Most of it is colorfully opinionated — a great virtue in my view — and closely related to the interpretation of biblical wisdom on each subject discussed. It is quite rare to see much at all about theology in these works. When theology does appear, it is very definitely aimed to help people acquire theological literacy of type A by introducing key episodes in the history of Christian doctrine or important contemporary debates about issues such as the authority of Scripture or denominational identity. This body of literature is aimed well, I would say: these books correctly assume that most readers are not interested in theology per se, but in making use of Christian faith and the Bible to cope better and to be happier, more productive, and more loving people.

It is extremely unusual to find popular books promoting theological literacy of type B in any bookstore, whether religious or secular. Certain periodicals such as *Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* do a little of that, but these tend to be aimed more at religious professionals and highly educated Christian thinkers than at a general audience; I have never known an ordinary church person to read them, though such readers must exist. From what I have said about the problem of theological literacy B, this dearth of books disclosing the secret wonders of profound theological reflection is far from surprising; in fact, it is completely predictable. Yet I wonder if there is not a market niche that might be filled with introductory presentations of some of the subtler joys of profound theology. It may well be a market niche having little to do with church people and better suited to religiously alienated or spiritually curious

folk, people who have perhaps been too appalled by religious protectiveness about the realities of life to be able to remain in regular attendance at worship services.

With this, then, I join my voice to those of others who, in recent years, have urged theologians to commit themselves to more openness with the general public about the wonders of theology. True, most people may not be interested and some might even have an allergic reaction to the unsettling dimensions of serious theology, but there are people interested in subtler, more penetrating ways of thinking about the ultimate concerns of their lives and of existence generally.

That such serious theological work has been so little comprehended and even encountered by potentially interested people raises some thought-provoking questions. The situation is not much like that of mathematics, in which there is an almost insurmountable communication problem associated with conveying esoteric results. It is rather the twofold problem of people not wanting to know conjoined with people not wanting to tell. Well, we can dismiss the first part of this problem as intractable because the audience for serious theology conveyed in a popular style would be self-selecting anyway. But why are theologians so reluctant to spill the beans about, for instance, a God so far beyond human comprehension that religion, as Karl Barth rightly said, is a mere striving after the divine? Is it to protect religious people from the blinding reality of God? Is this reticence for the sake of the protection of religious communions, groups assumed by secretive theologians to be so fragile that self-knowledge would threaten or dissolve them?

The silence of the theologians most certainly is *not* because they do not know what is going on; all serious theologians know these basic insights from the domain of theology and ponder them as they write and teach. To attempt an explanation of why they stay quiet, I shall describe briefly what theologians know about just one of the issues mentioned a couple of times above — the social construction of reality. Subsequently, I shall mention a few other secrets that theologians seem reluctant to bring out into the open, a reluctance that blocks the general public's chances of developing theological literacy of type B.

The sociology of knowledge has made it abundantly clear through the work of scholars such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann that humans construct their social reality. A theological interpretation of this basic result can be developed by likening cultural constructions to the earth's ozone layer. As the fragile ozone shields the earth from harmful high-energy radiation while allowing safer light to warm and power the ecosphere, so do the social constructions of human beings protect both individuals and corporate life from the harsher dimensions of reality while simultaneously allowing enough truth

through to illumine and power personal and cultural creativity. Moreover, formal religions and informal religious or spiritual activities are key components in the construction of this protective cultural ozone layer. They promote engagement with the divine reality out of which emerges the complex wonder of our lives even as they protect us from the full glory of this reality. When the chaotic or the awesome breaks through into our lives, as it does often enough, the ozone thins and the socially constructed world becomes more translucent to the bright glory of God, at least for some. Such light sears and, in pain and awe, we blessedly never forget. This is as clear a fact of life as any other. I speak of this bright mystery on the other side of our protective social constructions as God, but for present purposes I could live happily enough with many accounts of it — as nature's fecund depths, as the mystic's unspeakable mystery, as the power of being itself — so long as they were properly empirical about explaining this fundamental feature of human experience. Any such account allows theology room to move, though not necessarily a particular religion's version of theology.

This theological interpretation of the socially constructed character of human social and religious life is well understood by theologians. Ludwig Feuerbach knew it and registered with Karl Marx the aspect of G. W. F. Hegel's thought — as Hegel resonated with the aspects of Immanuel Kant's thought — in which this awareness exists. Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim knew it with complete conviction, as has every psychologist and sociologist since. Theologians who have paid attention to the development of human intellectual life since the Enlightenment have seen and understood all of this, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher. Barth was the great trailblazer of this awareness in twentieth-century theology, as well as the advocate of a solution that captured the imagination of a generation of theologians precisely because his followers felt such desperate need for a wholehearted solution. Barth's solution proved too unrealistic about the need to connect theology and culture in mutually critical correlation (to use the phrase David Tracy introduced to enhance Paul Tillich's account of this relation). Since Barth's time, however, all serious theologians know about the social construction of reality and religion's role in that; they think their theological thoughts with this intellectual heritage as a vital conditioning factor.

Despite these thoughts being well understood among theologians, it is hardly surprising, in view of the challenging conceptual content, that theologians have felt the need to harbor this knowledge as a secret. Religious groups find it intensely disturbing to become aware of their own psychic processes at work in the social realm, and doubly so when this awareness is extended to the religious domain. As I have said, such self-knowledge disturbs valuable pro-

cesses that function better when we remain unaware of them. Yet the pretense becomes futile after a while, at least for the growing numbers who sense these dynamics within the ordinary processes of religious groups. Western children are educated under these assumptions about human psychology and group life, and for most, such insights become reflexively automatic aspects of their youthful self-interpretation. It is pitiful to watch young men and women, as I have often done, plead for honesty from their religious leaders without really knowing that this is what they are doing. Though they don't want to read complex theological treatises, they do long to know that their precious religious experiences can be coordinated intelligibly with what they know otherwise about the world they inhabit. This also enrages me; the churches and synagogues can never do better with their young people so long as they insist on blocking the youthful urge to synthesize the apparently conflicting insights their experiences have brought them. The same goes for those upon whom life has visited special tragedy: comfort only works with such souls when it is as deep as the truth that divides between bone and marrow.

Well, so much for theological secretiveness about the social construction of reality and why I think it is a bad idea. But there are other theological secrets, too, whose disclosure to the general public would dramatically change the odds of ordinary people developing theological literacy B when the circumstances of life provoke that interest.

First, the hermeneutical complexity associated with interpreting the Bible is well understood by all thoughtful theologians. Almost all books specifically on the Bible published for the general public tackle refined debates about the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and mention only in passing the hermeneutical complexities taken for granted by all mainstream theologians, whether liberal or conservative, Jewish or Christian. This is a scandal as far as public communication is concerned. Any person studying high school literature in any language already knows much of this complex hermeneutical terrain, and it is worse than absurd that serious Christian theologians are unable to be both frank and helpful about this. Fundamentalists battling over esoteric details of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy amount to little more than shrill whining when we notice how useless those debates are for actually helping people to interpret the Bible responsibly. Theologians for the most part have abdicated this territory to the effete but noisy debates of a cultural backwater.

Second, the history of the development of religious doctrines is also well understood by all serious mainstream theologians. In relation to Christianity, the trailblazers in this regard are John Henry Cardinal Newman and Adolf von Harnack. Despite their profound disagreements about the truth of certain doctrines, they firmly agreed that Christian doctrine develops and that this devel-

opment cannot be explained as a mere logical outworking of already established doctrines. Their explanations differed — Newman stressed the regulative role of the supernaturally authorized teaching office of the pope, whereas Harnack emphasized the contingencies of historical circumstance — but both knew, as all theologians know, that there is historical dynamism in the development of Christian doctrine. Now, thoughtful people intuitively know that historical contingencies and balancing competing interests must be involved in giving official expression to the beliefs of a religious group. Yet doctrines are typically presented simply as given, once for all, as if from heaven, unmediated by any of the usual factors involved in messy social transactions. The risk theologians would take by speaking frankly of this knowledge might be the stimulation of questions about the teaching authority of the church. But the risk they take by staying silent is convincing thoughtful people that Christian intellectual life is divorced from common sense.

Third, serious theology has almost always had a constructive and appreciative relationship with the natural sciences. This secret is deeply buried beneath the noisy, media-sustained rhetoric of conflict inspired by a few extreme instances of real conflict such as the Christian church versus Galileo on the solar system and various biblical literalists versus biologists on evolutionary theory. However, as patient scholarship has shown, the Roman Catholic Church's handling of the Galileo affair was far more gracious and reasonable than is usually assumed. Moreover, Christian theologians came around fairly quickly on the solar system issue. Even the recent Roman Catholic apology for the Galileo affair too often is received cynically. Commentators usually fail to note that, years before the official apology, the Vatican established a world-class observatory and trained excellent cosmologists, astronomers, and astrophysicists as a way of indicating its seriousness about setting matters right. With regard to evolution, biblical literalists to the contrary notwithstanding, historical analysis has shown that most theologians adjusted fairly well to the arrival of evolutionary biology, being well acquainted already with concepts of historical and cultural development from other fields. Some greeted Darwin with enthusiasm, quickly developing theologies that simply presumed evolutionary biology. Most saw no problem imagining that God could create through the evolutionary process. Yet most in the general public simply are not aware of this, nor that theology in all religious traditions has worked in close alliance with natural science since the very beginning. A few theologians are trying to get this secret out to the general public's attention, but greater effort is needed to break through popular habits of thought on this question.

Finally, the greatest theological secret of all is the impossibility of an exhaustively rational description of the divine. Virtually all theologians in all

religious traditions hold this view, which is not one whit different from the view of great poets and artists in every time and place. The general public senses it for themselves, the more so when they venture to the art gallery, read their favorite poems, or find themselves utterly incapable of giving expression to their most profound experiences. Yet theologians are most often thought of as people who brashly, presumptuously, and obscurely dare to speak of the unspeakable, without any misgivings or self-restraint. And theologians are thought of this way because religious groups, especially Christian churches, are filled with God-talk that is usually more confident than it has reason to be. Such confident speech has a profound influence on the average religious believer, who adopts formulations offered with little awareness of their limitations. Islam does better in this regard, speaking bluntly about the imagination-defying richness of the divine, centralizing the ninety-nine names in religious practice so as to keep the mind from settling overconfidently on a single image of God. Judaism's reticence about the divine nature is differently effective in disrupting the grasping tendency of human imagination. Taoism, Buddhism, and mysticism in all traditions explicitly deconstruct concepts of ultimate reality. Christian theologians know much more about the impossibility of conceptually tying down the divine than their silence in the public domain indicates. The complex theological systems used by theologians are not developed in defiance of the ultimate futility of the God-talk task. Rather, they are developed to say what might be said as well as possible, but all serious theologians know that human theologies are born hovering above, and always eventually collapse into, the divine abyss beneath human existence. I do not see why this cannot be spoken of more frankly among the general public, not merely by novelists and poets but by theologians themselves.

I conclude that theologians' reticence to speak more frankly about theology for the general public is wrongheaded. The desire among many theologians not to disrupt important social processes within religious groups is commendable. But protecting the identity of a religious group is shortsighted when the cost involves its leaders' inability to be ready to speak the truth when needed and its members' inability to imagine the cloth of their lives as of one piece. Of course, it is hard to do serious theology knowing what theologians know, and it is difficult to convey religious truth when real caveats and complications are involved. But that's no excuse. Theologians have to speak clearly, with no obfuscation and no presumptuous protectiveness, if religious leaders and all interested people are to have a chance of becoming theologically literate in the type B way. Such clarity of purpose and frankness about the challenging complexities of serious theology is long overdue.