

*Types of Christian Theology*, by Hans W. Frei, ed. by George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, Yale University Press, 1992, xi + 180 pp. \$26.50, ISBN 0-300-05104-2

At the time of his death in 1988 at age sixty-six, Hans Frei was widely regarded as one of the more gifted and better furnished theologians of his generation. The sense of loss at his death was keen, particularly because it was well-known that he had been working for some years on a major book on the history of christology in the modern period. Thanks to Yale University Press as well as the colleagues and former students who have acted respectively as editorial committee and editors, the manuscripts Frei completed during the last decade of his life have now been collated, edited, and published in this single volume. Although the result is not the book Frei had projected, the lectures and papers that now appear as its seven chapters and three appendices make for a last book that is certainly not least. On the contrary, it is among the better written and more readable of Frei's publications, and anyone concerned with Christian theology and modernity, and especially with how theology itself is now to be understood and practiced, will definitely want to read and learn from it.

As its title indicates, the book is concerned primarily with understanding and appraising the main types of Christian theology—more exactly, modern Christian theology—and, therefore, with developing a typology suitable for distinguishing them. The formal structure of Frei's typology is clear enough. Assuming two contrary poles, it allows for five typical positions: a central position in which the two poles have equal status (Type 3); two mediating positions in each of which the posterior status of one pole is determined by assigning absolute priority to the other—the difference between the positions lying in which of the two poles is assigned such priority (Types 2 and 4); and two extreme positions in each of which the two poles are treated as absolutely different and only one of them has any status at all—the difference between them lying in which of the two poles is taken to have it (Types 1 and 5). Yet, if the formal structure of Frei's typology is easily grasped, this is not true of its material contents. On the contrary, I, for one, have had formidable difficulties in clearly understanding what he means by the two poles of his typology.

There are at least two reasons for this. One is his confusing, if not confused, characterizations of the two poles. Thus, in many places, he speaks of them as "the two ways of thinking about theology" (p. 23), or "the two basic views of theology" (p. 27), only to speak of them elsewhere as "the two types of theology," or "the two kinds of theology" (p. 34). But, aside from the fact that the two poles assumed by the typology ought not to be thus confused with any of its five types, these two ways of speaking can be taken as equivalent only on one condition—namely, that any view of theology, or way of

thinking about it, is and must be itself theological. Whether this condition obtains, however, Frei seems at best uncertain, referring to his typology in one place, indeed, as "a piece of conceptual analysis—that is, in principle an exercise chiefly *about* rather than *in* theology, although in practice the distinction will not always be clear" (p. 1; cf., however, p. 8). But even greater difficulties are created by his more specific characterizations of the two poles. Thus, for example, he can refer to the one pole both as "the philosophical kind of theology," i.e., "the kind of theology that [is] related to philosophy as the nearest fellow discipline in the academy" (p. 23), and as itself "philosophical theology," or "a philosophical discipline" (p. 34). Or, again, he can characterize it as "an academic discipline" (pp. 35, 65), or, simply, as "academic," in contrast to the other type of theology, which he characterizes as "church-oriented" (p. 68). Of course, there might be definitions of the operative terms here on which the equivalences implied between them would be intelligible even without the support of ordinary usage. But Frei quite fails to provide any such definitions, either explicitly as such or by implication.

And this is the second reason his typology is hard to understand: his failure clearly to define even his most important terms and his tendency to use them in confusing, if not confused, ways. Thus, oddly enough, he nowhere clearly defines even the crucial term "theology" in such a way that the two poles assumed by his typology could be understood to be contrary ways of understanding and practicing one and the same thing. To be sure, he does from time to time offer what might appear to be clarifications of "Christian theology" in the particular sense in which he himself, as a Type 4 theologian, would want to use it. But even these apparent clarifications generate serious difficulties in understanding.

For example, in at least two closely parallel passages (pp. 2, 124), he says that Christian theology is two things: first, "the first-order statements or proclamations made in the course of Christian practice and belief"; and, second, and more properly, "the Christian community's second-order appraisal of its own language and actions under a norm or norms internal to the community itself." "This appraisal, in turn," he says, "has two aspects": a "descriptive" aspect, in which it is "an endeavor to articulate the 'grammar,' or 'internal logic,' of first-order Christian statements"; and then a "critical" aspect, in which it is "an endeavor to judge any given articulation of Christian language for its success or failure in adhering to the acknowledged norm or norms governing Christian use of language." Elsewhere, however, in a passage in which Frei tells us that one can discover "at least three aspects" to Christian theology, we are given a significantly different account. Although he still speaks, first, of "first-order theology," which he now explicitly identifies as "Christian

witness," he characterizes the second aspect, not as an "appraisal" of such witness having both a "descriptive" and a "critical" aspect, but exclusively as the descriptive endeavor to bring out the grammatical or logical rules implicit in such witness, while he describes the third aspect as "a kind of quasi-philosophical or philosophical activity, . . . which consists in trying to tell others, perhaps outsiders, how these rules compare and contrast with their kinds of ruled discourse" (pp. 20 f.).

In other words, Frei's confusing uses and clarifications of "Christian theology" leave one wondering whether the endeavor it refers to does, in fact, consist in an "appraisal" of Christian witness or whether, on the contrary, it is entirely lacking in a "critical" aspect and, therefore, is a purely "descriptive" activity of the sort that could just as well be left to the social scientist or the analytic philosopher. Nor are one's misgivings about this likely to be relieved when one notices that Frei never speaks of Christian theology, when referring to it by a shorthand phrase, as "Christian self-*appraisal*," but consistently refers to it, instead, simply as "Christian self-*description*."

So far as his typology is concerned, then, readers are not likely to learn as much from Frei as he might have taught them had he proceeded more carefully in developing it. My guess is that most, if not all, of what he intends to say by it could be rather more adequately said were one to develop a formally similar typology also allowing for five main types, but assuming a clear definition of Christian theology in terms of which the two poles of the typology as well as the types themselves could be clearly characterized and distinguished. The definition I have in mind would allow one to speak of Christians' doing of theology, in a comparably short single phrase, as "Christian self-*validation*," in that Christian theology, properly so-called, is defined as the critical validation of the distinctive claims to validity expressed or implied in bearing Christian witness. Allowing, then, that there are two such claims with which Christian systematic theology, as such, is concerned, namely, the claims of Christian witness to be both appropriate to Jesus Christ and credible to human existence, one could distinguish the two poles assumed by the typology as respectively the understanding and practice of systematic theology as critical validation of the claim of Christian witness to be credible and the understanding and practice of systematic theology as critical validation of the claim of Christian witness to be appropriate. Assuming these two poles, one could clearly distinguish five main ways of understanding and practicing systematic theology, and so develop a typology that would enable one to attain the very goals of understanding and appraising modern theologies that Frei's typology was developed to attain. One would enjoy the further advantage of also clearly distinguishing Christian theology in general from Christian systematic theology in

particular, thereby avoiding yet another of the unfortunate confusions running throughout Frei's book, even, indeed, in his interpretations of Schleiermacher and Barth, both of whom are at pains to distinguish theology generally from the particular undertaking that they speak of as "dogmatics."

This leads to brief comment on the other reason why, for one reader, at least, Frei's book is not as instructive as one might have hoped. I refer to his interpretations of particular modern theologies in terms of his typology. Some of these interpretations, to be sure, are apt and illuminating—at any rate, if one supposes, as I do, that his typology is intended to say what is rather better expressed by the alternative typology I have just suggested. This is particularly true, in my judgment, of his interpretation of Barth as a Type 4 theologian, who, as I would put it, determines the posterior status of critically validating the claim of Christian witness to be credible to human existence by assigning absolute priority to critically validating its claim to be appropriate to Jesus Christ. Also insightful, I believe, is Frei's interpretation of Schleiermacher's theology (and, to a lesser degree, Tillich's) as belonging to Type 3, provided, again, that for theologies of this type, the two poles that are taken to have equal status may be said to be, in my terms, critically validating the claim of Christian witness to be credible and critically validating its claim to be appropriate. In the case of several other theologies, however, Frei's interpretations seem to me to be exceedingly dubious.

This is true, above all, of his interpretation of Bultmann's theology, as well as of David Tracy's, as belonging to Type 2. For all he ever shows to the contrary, anything that he says for either Schleiermacher's or Tillich's being a Type 3 theology could be said with equal force, *mutatis mutandis*, of both Bultmann's and Tracy's, if not also of Pannenberg's and those of others that are likewise either asserted or implied to belong to Type 2, including my own. Frei's editors, significantly, are aware of this in the case of Tracy, although they explain it away by talking about Tracy's having "shifted ground somewhat in his later work," instead of acknowledging that even the theology that Tracy set forth already in *Blessed Rage for Order* can be interpreted as Frei interprets it only by conveniently ignoring much that it says or clearly implies (p. x).

That Frei fails to realize this is due, I am certain, to his underlying Barthian, or Type 4, assumption that the two poles assumed by the typology are so related that they cannot finally have equal status, because one of them must sooner or later be assigned absolute priority, thereby determining the absolute posteriority of the other. Thus even in his interpretation of Schleiermacher, he speaks—altogether implausibly—of a "tension" in Schleiermacher's view between "Wissenschaft and theology" and of "Schleiermacher's

inability to integrate conceptually the idea of the university and the practical school of professional education" (pp. 119, 129). Or, again, the only way he knows to show that Schleiermacher's is a Type 3 theology is to argue—again, altogether implausibly—that it involves "a correlation between equals" and therefore to deny that, for the Schleiermacher of the Introduction to *The Christian Faith*, the "particular" is logically dependent on the "general," not the other way around, so that "the pious Christian self-consciousness" is not "correlated" with "the sense of absolute dependence," but is taken, rather, as necessarily presupposing it (pp. 81, 83, 65 ff.). Thus Frei's talk of "Schleiermacher's correlationist views" completely misses the possibility of a type of Christian theology—arguably, the very Type 3 that Schleiermacher pioneered in working out—for which it makes as little sense to talk about "correlating" the two poles, or "balancing" them, as it does to assign either of them an absolute priority, since each of them may be quite properly said to be prior to the other relative to one of the two claims expressed or implied in bearing Christian witness. Relative to the one claim of witness to be appropriate to Jesus Christ, critically validating it may be rightly assigned priority, while relative to the other claim to be credible to human existence priority may be equally rightly assigned to critically validating it.

Taken altogether, Frei's typology and his interpretations of theologies in terms of it seem to me to raise the question of whether a Type 3 theology in this sense is really possible. If his own Type 4 theology is valid, such a Type 3 theology can only too easily appear impossible or, at best, unstable, demanding to be resolved into either a Type 4 theology or, as has proved more likely in the modern period, a Type 2 theology. If, on the other hand, such a Type 3 theology is, as I believe, a real possibility, then Barthianism of all sorts, including Frei's own, is likely to seem as questionable a theological project as the kind of "mediating theology" that it has typically mistaken to be the only other real alternative (pp. 88 ff., 156 f.).

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