

Consensus

Volume 14

Issue 1 *Essays: Historical and Theological*

Article 6

5-1-1988

A perspective on 'Perspectives': a response to the Spring 1987 issue of Consensus

W. R. Turner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Turner, W. R. (1988) "A perspective on 'Perspectives': a response to the Spring 1987 issue of Consensus," *Consensus*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol14/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

RESPONSE

In our Spring 1987 issue of *Consensus* we invited readers to respond to the "Perspectives on Evangelicalism/Fundamentalism/Neo-Conservatism" that were put forward by the various LTS professors. There were many affirmative verbal responses, but to date we have received only one written response. It comes from Wayne Turner. Mr. Turner, who brings a strong background in philosophy to his M.T.S. studies at our Seminary in Saskatoon, finds some logical fallacies in the argumentation; he argues that the incorporation of these fallacies confuses the issue and keeps the authors from being able "to assess the relative merits of each position." We hope this contribution will help to clarify the debate and keep the discussion alive.

John W. Kleiner
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon

A Perspective on Perspectives: A Response to the Spring 1987 Issue of *Consensus*

W. R. Turner

M.T.S. Student

Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon

In the Foreword to the Spring 1987 issue of *Consensus*, John Kleiner notes that the subject chosen for consideration—evangelicalism/fundamentalism/neo-conservatism—“remains somewhat elusive” and that “the essays are not all written from the same perspective.” Here “perspective” means points of view that either disapprove of or support the religious phenomena in question. However, to offer a perspective entails not only the judgment upon the truth or importance of the subject in question, but also a clear exposition of the point of view which is judging the subject matter. It is this latter element that is conspicuously absent in most of the articles.

Unfortunately, this absence facilitates, on the one hand, the deployment of fallacious arguments and, on the other hand, prevents the self-reflection necessary for participation in genuine dialogue. In the first case, both R. Nostbakken and W. Freitag commit a genetic fallacy¹ when they argue that one can account for a religious phenomenon by reducing it to its sociological or psychological matrix. By assuming a strong causal nexus between social circumstances and psychological tendencies an attempt is made to explain away the arguments of neo-conservatism without engaging them. However, the social conditions of desperation, anxiety, and skepticism shape both conservatism, with its simplistic worldview, legalism, and charismatic leadership, and liberalism, with its emphasis on ambiguity, struggle and uncertainty; thus both are children of the *same* social situation—twentieth century North America. Consequently, it is impossible to determine which movement is more determined, reactive, authentic, or true.

In the second case, the unwillingness to articulate one's

own theological position obscures the point that both conservatism and liberalism received their theological trajectories from a confrontation with the liberal paradigm of knowledge,² a paradigm that is in the process of being dismantled.³ Given the historical absence of fruitful discussion between "conservative" and "liberal" Christianity, one wonders if the shrill tones and exasperated responses on both sides do not reflect an allegiance to a common philosophical framework. That is, both sides hold with the liberal paradigm of knowledge that knowledge claims must be based on indubitable, incontrovertible, and self-evident foundations. They disagree, however, on particular claims which aspire to that status.

Let us consider two statements made by R. Nostbakken and W. Freitag. Nostbakken says that "it is important for us to try and gain some understanding of why a particular emphasis or thrust has a special appeal in a given historical period."⁴ Freitag surmises that there are those who "find it utterly necessary to satisfy an unquenchable thirst for certitude in the faith," and asks, "what is it in the psychological makeup of such persons that accounts for such a need?"⁵ However, one can also ask what is the special appeal of Platonism, Newtonianism, and Darwinism, in their respective historical periods. Further, one can also ask for a psychological account of Plato's, Luther's, Descartes', and Newton's desire for certainty. But it is, of course, another thing to assess the relative merits of each position. And it is another thing yet to argue against certainty as the mark of truth.

To complicate the picture even more one can also point out that certainty as the mark of truth is an intuition that necessarily arises out of the prevalence of the liberal paradigm of knowledge or what secular authors call "foundationalism." R. Bernstein writes that the "disease" which characterizes contemporary thought is the result of a basic conviction about knowledge. Bernstein calls this basic conviction "objectivism," that is, "that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness."⁶ Such a belief is motivated by what Bernstein calls Cartesian Anxiety: "Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelope us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos."⁷

It is important to note that Bernstein is not claiming insight into the social conditions that spawned the psychological reality of Cartesian Anxiety; rather, he is claiming that the notion that nothing is true unless it is eternal, immutable, absolute, and certain, is a notion ubiquitous to almost all contemporary intellectual discourse. Here we see exactly how neo-conservatives are trapped by the twentieth-century straight-jacket of rationalism to which E. Buck refers.⁸

But the question is, does liberal theology as an alternative perspective escape this straightjacket? For example, one of the so-called dogmas of empiricism, the analytic-synthetic distinction,⁹ is the basis for the difference between necessary and contingent truths. Traditionally, one of the arguments against grounding faith in historical evidence is that such evidence is always approximate, hence, contingent. Both Lessing and Kierkegaard had nothing but disdain for the "ugly ditch" that separated the "accidental truths of history" from the "necessary truths of reason." Michalson writes:

The Lessing-Kierkegaard view of faith's relation to historical research has dominated the mainstream of protestant thought in this century, shaping the major theological responses to the growing difficulties posed by historical criticism and by the obvious problematic relationship in which faith stands to modern biblical research.¹⁰

Thus, Michalson accounts for Neo-Orthodoxy's rejection of the search for the historical Jesus as "theologically irrelevant." Bultmann's distinction between "Historie" and "Geschichte" and his disdain for the "bloss historisch," and H.R. Niebuhr's invocation of the confessional "inner history" as a domestication of the "nagging problem of historical relativism," are classic examples manifesting the "Kierkegaardian view toward history." However, Quine, Heidegger, Kuhn, Foucault, and others, have pointed out that notions of necessity are often just deeply ingrained linguistic habits, thus, blurring the analytic-synthetic distinction and undermining the necessary-contingent distinction. Consequently, not only have the above theological distinctions become unnecessary, so has the need to verify the historical credibility of the Bible through theories of inspiration and inerrancy, or to appeal to the distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the kerygma.

There are, of course, other examples of seemingly opposed theological positions trading on the same philosophical

distinctions.¹¹ If the liberal paradigm of knowledge is as prevalent as some would argue this could not help but be the case. Why, then, it may be asked, is it so critical for theology to engage in serious self-reflection with respect to its precise relationship to this paradigm? The reason is that the liberal paradigm of knowledge is being dismantled by various thinkers and writers. The failure of the liberal humanist dream, it is argued, is essentially linked to the concept of "liberal reason." P. Hinlicky, for example, argues that the violence of our society arises out of liberalism's profound misunderstanding of human agency. Whereas Nostbakken calls on us to protect our "personal autonomy and right to decision,"¹² Hinlicky argues that the anthropocentric exaltation of human agency is the ideal left to us by the Enlightenment. By this ideal Hinlicky means, "the reciprocally reinforcing convictions that progress is the inevitable consequence of human agency, and that progress consists in the ever greater amplification of human agency (or "freedom")."¹³ He further argues,

The modern doctrine of the human person as the autonomous, value-creating agent of history, whether in its liberal or socialist versions, is rightly under widespread attack, not only because of its impossible pretensions, but because of the dawning and dreadful recognition that this titanism is itself a parent of the entrenched brutalities of modernity.¹⁴

T. Spragens also argues for a similar position:

The problem is not that men (as has often been noted) do not in fact behave in a rational fashion; the problem is what happens when they *do* behave in accordance with the image of reason that arose with political liberalism or at any rate take it seriously as an accurate account of the nature and scope of human knowledge.¹⁵

Violence, the quest for certainty, social unrest, intractable philosophical and theological problems, are by this view the result of a prevalent paradigm of knowledge that has dominated the modern period. Theological debate, then, requires a deflection into self-reflection before it can enter into meaningful debate. It is hoped that this essay provides some reason for a deferral of a new round of liberal and conservative theological headbutting. By seeing both intellectual strands as minor variations on a basic paradigm of knowledge the stage is set for theology, on the one hand, to free itself from an outmoded and destructive form of knowledge and, on the other hand, to

generate from within a clear and coherent theological position that will not be dismissed by society as either irrational and hopeful or rational and hopeless.

Notes

- ¹ "Genetic accounts of an issue may be true, and they may be illuminating as to why the issue has assumed its present form, but they are irrelevant to its merits." S.M. Engle, *With Good Reason*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982) 170.
- ² The following list of principal tenets of the liberal paradigm of knowledge is from T.A. Spragens, Jr., *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) 22-23.
 1. The assumptions and methods of the previously dominant Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition are mistaken and must be fundamentally revised or supplanted before "natural philosophy" can be possible.
 2. The human understanding, guided by the "natural light of reason," can and should be autonomous. Moreover, it constitutes the norm and the means by reference to which all else is to be measured.
 3. It is possible and necessary to begin the search for knowledge with a clean slate.
 4. It is possible and necessary to base knowledge claims on a clear and distinct, indubitable, self-evident foundation.
 5. This foundation is to be composed of simple, unambiguous ideas or perceptions.
 6. The appropriate formal standards for all human knowledge are those of the mathematical modes of inquiry.
 7. The key to the progress of human knowledge is the development and pursuit of explicit rules of method.
 8. The entire body of valid human knowledge is a unity, both in method and in substance.
 9. Therefore, human knowledge may be made almost wholly accessible to all men, provided only that they not be abnormally defective in their basic faculties.
 10. Genuine knowledge is in some sense certain, "verifiable," and capable of being made wholly explicit.
 11. Knowledge is power, and the increase of knowledge therefore holds the key to human progress.
- ³ See for examples, R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), and, M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. anonymous (New York: Vintage Books, 1970). R.L. Maddox offers a good survey article on the implications that the dismantlement of empiricism has for theology, "Contemporary Hermeneutic Philosophy

- and Theological Studies," *Religious Studies* 21/4 (1985) 517-529. See also Angus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
- 4 R. Nostbakken, "The Religious Context of Neo-Conservatism," *Consensus* 13/1 (Spring 1987) 20.
 - 5 W. Freitag, "Fundamentalism and Canadian Lutheranism," *Consensus* 13/1 (Spring 1987) 32.
 - 6 R. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1985) 8.
 - 7 Ibid. 18.
 - 8 E. Buck, "The Place of the New Testament in the Neo-Conservative Movement," *Consensus* 13/1 (Spring 1987) 55.
 - 9 Analytic statements are true independently of any appeal to the world. Synthetic statements are not. "All bachelors are unmarried males," is an analytic statement and necessarily true since any denial would be self-contradictory. But Quine objects, "But how do we find out that 'bachelor' is defined as 'unmarried' man? Who defines it thus, and when?... Certainly the 'definition' which is the lexicographer's report of observed synonymy cannot be taken as the ground of synonymy," from "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 2-46.
 - 10 G.E. Michalson, Jr., "Theology, Historical Knowledge, and the Contingent-Necessity Distinction," *International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 14, 88.
 - 11 For example, the second dogma of empiricism, the Myth of the Given, serves as an appeal to a prelinguistic verification of experience and undergirds both "born again" experiences and the "existential impact of the Easter event." See Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 182f., and C. West, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics and the Myth of the Given," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 34/2 (Winter 1979) 71-85.
 - 12 Nostbakken, "The Religious Context," 13.
 - 13 P. Hinlicky, "The Human Predicament in Emergent Post-Modernity," *Dialog* 23/3 (Summer 1984) 168.
 - 14 Ibid. 171.
 - 15 Spragens, *The Irony of Liberal Reason* 14.