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Paradigm, System, and Theological Pluralism

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I. Introduction

Hans Küng has persuasively shown that in the constitution of its teachings Christian theology has employed various 'paradigms.'[1] According to Küng the fact that Christian theology has operated under different scientific paradigms explains some foundational differences that exist among various theologies and traditions. Moreover, Küng believes that Christian theology should formulate a new paradigm that could facilitate ecumenical unity by overcoming foundational theoretical differences created by old traditional paradigms. The new paradigm is expected to avoid partisan claims to truth in search of the ecumenical union of all Christians.[2] Küng's proposal regarding the role paradigms play in the constitution of Christian teachings must be taken seriously. However, one cannot help wondering whether the paradigm is the grounding a priori level explaining the existence and dynamics of theological pluralism.

I would like to suggest that the cause for the theological fragmenta-

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1 See his *Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View* (New York: Doubleday, 1988). Several of the ideas that Küng develops in his book were addressed during an International Ecumenical Symposium that took place at the University of Tübingen in 1983 under the general title 'A New Paradigm of Theology'(Küng, 123–124). Contributors included Stephen Toulmin, Langdon Gilkey, Martin Marty, Anne Carr, and David Tracy (from the University of Chicago), Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, Norbert Greinacher, and Rüdiger Bubner (Tübingen), J. B. Metz (Münster), Gregory Baum (Toronto), Leonardo Boff (Petrópolis), Jean-Pierre Jossua and Claude Geffré (Paris), Joseph Blank (Saarbrücken), Edward Schillebeeckx (Nijmegen), John Cobb (Claremont), Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (Notre Dame), and Mariasusai Dhavamone (Rome) (*ibid.*, 170–171).

2 Küng, 170–181.

tion fostered by postmodern times[3] is to be found in a deeper level of theological a priori. I am referring to the theological system. The difference between Küng's proposal and mine, therefore, is one of level rather than of essence. My proposal then, requires that the epistemological distinction between paradigm and system be clearly perceived. Küng is right in saying that the paradigm conditions theology. Yet, his proposition does not contemplate the paradigm-system distinction. A closer look at the theological a priori will reveal that the paradigm itself is conditioned by the system. When the distinction between paradigm and system is recognized the real cause for modern and postmodern pluralisms comes into view.

The purpose of this article is to distinguish between the paradigm and the system in order to assess the way in which the system relates to the attempt of overcoming theological fragmentation in postmodern times. Our inquiry will start with a brief reference to Küng's proposal regarding the paradigm as tool for approaching postmodern theological pluralism. Then, rationality will be identified as the a priori level where the paradigm and the system operate. Next, in an attempt to distinguish between paradigm and system I will examine the paradigm as interpretation of the disciplinary matrix of theology, and, the system as interpretation of the systematicness of reason. Finally, the hypotheticity of the system will allow us to deal with the way in which the theological a priori, involving both system and paradigm, seems to relate to postmodern pluralism.

II. Küng's Proposal: The Paradigm

Christian theology is a complex enterprise. Its complexity derives from its object. 'The task of theology,' states Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'includes all truth whatsoever.'[4] The composite nature of the subject matter of

3 Since both the concepts of modernity and postmodernity are contested ones it is not possible to defined them here in detail. By postmodernity I refer to the epistemological changes generated by the criticism of classical and modern understandings of reason and Being. In this sense postmodernism has produced not only a criticism of traditional positions but has advanced some new interpretations. For an introduction to the way the concept of postmodernity is understood in other areas of knowledge see Bryan S. Turner, ed., *Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: Sage, 1990).

4 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundfragen Systematischer Theologie*, p. 22, quoted by Arthur B. Crabtree, 'Methodological Consensus? A Protestant Perspective,' in *Consensus in Theology?: A Dialogue with Hans Kung and Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx (Philadelphia, PA.: Westminster, 1980), 79. Most Christian theologians agree that God is the true object of theology. At times this object has been understood in the narrow sense of the doctrine of God. Other times, the object of theology has been broaden to include the 'economical' acts of God from creation to eschatological fulfilment. 'The later extension of the concept of theology to cover the area of the divine economy was justified—explains Pannenberg—by the argument

theology requires a disciplinary complexity as well.[5] Among others, Bernard Lonergan[6] and Gerhard Ebeling [7] have carefully studied the disciplinary complexity of Christian theology. This complexity includes methodologies and procedures belonging to the area of theological a priori. Explicitly or implicitly, decisions regarding the theological a priori are made by the scholarly community. Once a decision is made and incorporated into the tradition of a discipline, say for instance at the level of methodology, that decision becomes an unavoidable presupposition. When a presupposition is constituted, it determines others logically flowing from it. This process, being constantly repeated, gives birth to what Küng calls paradigm. Constant repetitions of the same disciplinary and methodological decisions are, so to speak, kept in the consciousness of the scientific community.[8] Definitions collected in the consciousness of the community not only become independent (a priori) from scientific research itself, but also play a significant role in its results.[9]

When the paradigm of a given tradition is constituted, it becomes binding for all its members. It is not surprising that participants of a tradition see things along the same lines. For instance, theologians belonging to the same scholarly tradition understand the Bible within the same general parameters. Thus, nobody within the tradition feels the need to challenge the basic assumptions collected in the paradigm. Yet, another scholarly tradition may have a different understanding of the scientific paradigm. For each tradition their definition of the paradigm seems obvious and absolute. Since the existence of the a priori level of disciplinary presuppositions is not usually addressed by the scholarly community, members of any given tradition may mistakenly assume that their views are universally accepted by all traditions.

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4 (*Continued*) that everything studied within this comprehensive theology was studied from the point of view of its relation to God (*sub ratione Dei*)' (*Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, tr. by Francis McDonagh Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], 298). The narrow view may favor the notion that the object of theology is simple while the broader view seems to favor the idea that the object of theology is complex.

5 This is not the place to discuss the nature of the subject matter of theology. Not all traditions will agree with the idea that the object of theology is composite. The classical tradition proposes that God, the subject matter of theology is simple. Yet even Aquinas who maintains that 'God is the object of this science [sacra doctrina]' (*ST.*, I. 1. 7), recognizes that the study of God involves many things such as signs, the works of salvation, the whole Christ as the head and members (*ibid.*).

6 *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

7 *The Study of Theology*, tr. by Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia, PA.: Fortress, 1978).

8 Pannenberg has given extensive treatment to the scientific status of Christian theology in his *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*.

9 The concept of a priori is not used here in its Kantian sense of independence from sensory perception, but only in the sense of independence from the scientific processing and interpretation of data.

This explains why, when constituents of two different scholarly tradi-
tions come together in dialogue, communication is sometimes very
difficult. What one understands within a given framework or horizon,
another interprets from a different perspective. Applying the concept
of scientific paradigm to disputes between 'progressives' and 'conser-
vatives' Küng explains that 'since we are dealing here with paradigms,
basic assumptions that have been long in ripening, are deeply rooted,
profoundly influential, often conscious and often unconscious, the
dispute between the so-called progressives and conservatives in the
various churches is often so hard, and seemingly irreconcilable.'[10] In
reality such differences are irreconcilable if the two 'visions' are main-
tained. The only way to reconcile them is by working on the paradigm
level.

The paradigm used by the science of theology becomes a vision
necessary for understanding.[11] The paradigm allows data and issues to
be seen in a particular way. Nevertheless, the paradigm can also distort
or eliminate relevant data. This point is presented by Küng as he deals
with the dynamics of paradigm shift. When accepting a new paradigm,
explains Küng,

> theologians accustom themselves, as it were, to another kind of seeing:
> seeing in the context of a different model. Many things are now perceived
> that were missed before, and some things too may be overlooked that used
> to be in people's line of sight. A new vision of man, the world, and God
> begins to prevail in the domain of theological scholarship, where the whole
> and its details appear in a different light.[12]

Küng's proposal, therefore, shifts theological dialogue from the
doctrinal to the a priori level of epistemology. I agree with Küng's
perception that a major cause for divisive pluralism in Christian theol-
ogy is to be found in the a priori component of the scientific structure
of theology.

III. The Rationality of Theology

Belonging to the ambit of knowledge is one feature that theology has
in common with any given cognitive enterprise. Theology shares in the

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10 Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 126.
11 The possession of a technical paradigm determines the essential difference that
    exists between a theologian and a lay person.
12 Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 145. The question is whether the new vision
    regarding, man, the world, and, God precedes the paradigm as its necessary
    condition , or, whether the paradigm change produces the new vision regarding
    man, the world, and God. My opinion is that the new vision on man, world, and,
    God, precedes the paradigm as its necessary condition and presupposition.

principles that rule the constitution of meanings in general. Let us consider briefly the rational nature of theology from the epistemological perspective.

Natural theology appears to be clearly rational. Its sources are provided by data accessible to everyone, and, its procedures follow generally accepted philosophical patterns. Yet what about Christian theology which is based on the supernatural data of revelation? Is it rational or irrational? To define the rational nature of theology on the basis of its source of information is misleading. To argue that revealed theology is non-rational because of the supernatural origin of its sources amounts to an unwarranted reduction of rationality to the question of sources. If we insist on pressing this restricted view of rationality Christian theology cannot qualify as rational.

However, when the broader epistemological sense of rationality is brought into the picture, the rationality of theology becomes the field rather than the origin of its cognitions. 'Rational' in this broader essential sense refers to that which belongs to the field of human cognition. Here, reason is understood from the viewpoint of its essence as activity, and not from the viewpoint of the origin of its data. Since both natural and revealed theologies are intellectual activities produced by the human mind, they belong to the realm of knowledge. Because they belong to the realm of knowledge, they are essentially rational enterprises.

Rationality is broader than philosophical or scientific teachings that may or may not be incorporated in theological reflection. To identify rationality with philosophy or science is misleading. Rationality is equal to the very structure of human thinking and reflecting. It is in this broader sense that reason pertains to the essence not only of theology but of biblical revelation as well.[13]

Unlike natural theology, Christian theology cannot take place in isolation from biblical revelation. The Bible is expressed in human ideas and written in human language. Consequently, it has been produced by means of and within the realm of human rationality, or, at least, under the conditions set up by the cognitive structure of human reason. In this epistemological sense revelation is rational. This characteristic is not a hindrance for supernatural revelation but the very means through which the Bible can provide ideas that may compete with philosophical ones on their own turf. Thus, to keep the uniqueness of divine revelation and Christian theology we must not identify human reason with human philosophy. On the contrary, as we enlarge our vision of what rationality involves we affirm the rationality

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13 In its broadest epistemological sense, then, rationality includes what Kant calls reason, intellect and sensory perception.

of biblical revelation. In short, as God draws near humanity to reveal his ideas, plans, and purposes, he does it within the field of human reason. Yet the content of the ideas expressed does not proceed from a human but from the divine source.[14] Consequently, the task of doing Christian theology takes place within the area of rationality. It is to the area of human rationality that the theological a priori belongs.

IV. Disciplinary Matrix and Paradigm

The a priori level includes two main components: the paradigm and the system. The paradigm is the interpretation of the disciplinary-methodological matrix of theology as scientific discipline. The system is the interpretation of the systematicness of reason which becomes the ultimate horizon for the intelligibility of the paradigm and theological doctrines as well.

Paradigm and system are not to be identified. Paradigm, according to Küng, is the ensemble of 'an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.'[15] Therefore, paradigm points to the field of basic definitions in the area of disciplinary activities, like for instance, methods, procedures, techniques, beliefs, values, etc. . . . Küng's definition of the a priori component of theology he calls 'paradigm' seems to include elements belonging to the interpretation of the disciplinary matrix of theology and to its systematicness. Let us distinguish, then, between paradigm and system.

Let us use the word paradigm to name the interpretation of the disciplinary matrix of theology. 'Disciplinary matrix' designates the general epistemological structure of each theological science. Each discipline in the theological encyclopedia shares in the same basic structure of human knowledge. Through a phenomenological description of knowledge the basic structure of human knowledge comes to view as a subject-object relationship.[16] Since all theological disciplines take place as cognitive enterprises, the basic structure of human knowledge as a subject-object-relationship applies to them all. Each discipline stands on its specific definition of the subject-object-relation-

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14 I am assuming the fact and interpretation of divine revelation. I assume the historical-cognitive interpretation of revelation-inspiration as well (Fernando Canale, 'Revelation and Inspiration: The Historical Cognitive Model.' *AUSS* 33, 1995, 5–38).

15 Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, 132.

16 See Nicolai Hartmann, *Grundzüge einer Metaphysik der Erkenntns* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1941), 1.5; see also F. L. Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason* (Berrien Springs, MI.: Andrews University Press, 1987), 27–34; and Johannes Hessen, *Erkenntnistheorie* (Berlin: Fred Dummlers, 1926).

ship. From the side of the object, each discipline must define its data[17] and subject matter;[18] from the side of the subject, they should make the presuppositions[19] involved in the interpretation of the subject matter explicit; and, from the side of the relationship, they should formulate the methodology required to process the data in search of a better understanding of the subject matter. Thus, it is possible to see that the disciplinary matrix of each theological discipline includes four major components: the subject matter, the data, the presuppositions and the methodology. Furthermore, the description of the general features of the various disciplines involved in the task of doing Christian theology and their interrelationships also form part of the disciplinary matrix of theology.

Each theological discipline shares in the broader definition of the disciplinary matrix of theology as a whole. Working within the same general understanding of the data, presuppositions and methodology, each discipline contributes to the larger task of clarifying the subject matter of Christian theology. In this general sense it is possible to speak of one disciplinary matrix of theology that, due to the complexity of data and subject matter, involves various specialized areas of research entailing the various disciplines of the theological encyclopedia. The paradigm is the interpretation of the disciplinary matrix both at its general and specific disciplinary levels. This understanding of the paradigm does not contradict what Küng, following Thomas Kuhn, calls paradigm yet it is much more specific in nature. Küng's broader notion of paradigm includes[20] the interpretation of the scientific matrix.[21]

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17 For a brief introduction to the traditional approach to the sources of theology see, for instance, Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 330–344. John Macquarrie speaks of six formative factors, namely, 'experience, revelation, scripture, tradition, culture, [and] reason' (*ibid.*, 4). Regarding the subject matter of theology see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, 295–345. On the issue of presuppositions see Anders Nygren, *Meaning and Method: Prolegomena to a Scientific Philosophy of Religion and a Scientific Theology* (Philadelphia, PA.: Fortress Press, 1972).

18 Christian theologians generally agree that the subject matter of theology is the study of God, see for instance,Thomas Aquinas *ST*, Ia. 1. 7; Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 10; and Johann Auer, and Joseph Ratzinger, *Kleine katholische Dogmatik*, 9 vols. (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1978), vol. 2: *Gott, der Eine und Dreieine*, by Johann Auer, 110.

19 Anders Nygren's *Meaning and Method* has shown the existence and role of presuppositions in theology with remarkable skill and clarity.

20 In his *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future* (tr., John Bowden [New York: Continuum, 1995]), Hans Küng develops in great historical and theological detail what he considers to be the content and history of paradigm shifts in Christianity. In historical sequence, Küng recognizes the Eschatological, Hellenistic, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Enlightenment and Contemporary Ecumenical paradigms. A careful reading of Küng's description shows that within the idea of paradigm he includes a variety of issues. Besides the more theoretical epistemological aspects involved in

The existence of an operative theological paradigm, then, assumes an explicit or implicit process of interpretation of the disciplinary matrix of theology. Since any interpretation requires a horizon, we need to identify the horizon assumed in the interpretation of the disciplinary matrix of theology. In my opinion, the horizon from which the paradigm as interpretation of the disciplinary matrix develops and nurtures is the system that also belongs to the general a priori level of presuppositions.

V. Paradigm and System

Once the paradigm is constituted, it functions as a presupposition for the task of doing theology.

Concretely, it functions as a 'vision.' In this sense, paradigm is analogous to the 'system' which also functions as a presupposition and a vision. Küng's analysis of the theological a priori does not go into the deeper level where the paradigm finds its ground. The paradigm itself clearly has a ground namely the system. If this is so, theology should develop in harmony with the given paradigm that is being used, and the paradigm should develop in harmony with the chosen system. The system determines the paradigm, and, the system and the paradigm determine theology. Any theology that ignores the task of interpreting the disciplinary matrix and its grounding system is blind.

The notion of system, though widely recognized and used, has not been technically explored in theological studies. In theology the idea of system is utilized in a variety of ways. System can be used in the sense of 'ordo disciplinae,' that is, as the principle that organizes the presentation of Christian doctrines. The total sum of organized Christian doctrines is also known as 'system.' The a priori hermeneutical

20 (*Continued*) what I call system and paradigm, Küng includes more specific doctrinal, ecclesiological, sociological, political and cultural elements that played influential roles in the way Christianity was understood in each historical period.

21 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also Kuhn, 'Reflections on my Critics,' in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Irme Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: University Press, 1970); and, *The Essential Tension. Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). Ian G. Barbour also makes a substantial contribution to the discussion of the scientific paradigm idea in his *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). On the scholarly debate originated by Kuhn's proposal see Gary Gutting ed., *Paradigms & Revolutions. Applications and Appraisals of Thomas Kuhn's Philosophy of Science* (South Bend, IN.: University of Notre Dame, 1980); Joseph Grünfeld, 'Kuhn's Paradigm: Science as History', *Science et Esprit* 34/1 (1982): 97–10, and Frank Hasel, 'Scientific Revolution: An Analysis and Evaluation of Thomas Kuhn's Concept of Paradigm and Paradigm Change for Theology,' *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 2 (1991): 160–177.

principles for the constitution of Christian Dogmatics is another, more technically nuanced, meaning of system. Finally, the specific principle of articulation of the whole can also be named system. In this article I am dealing with the notion of system in the latter two meanings.

Kant realized that the interpretation of the 'disciplinary matrix' or paradigm stands on the horizon provided by the system. In the 'Architectonic of Pure Reason' Kant explained that 'without systematic unity, our knowledge cannot become a science.'[22] The system, according to Kant decides the form, limits, content, and place of each part included in the whole.[23] Ronald H. Nash uses the 'worldview' designation to label the same foundational role played by the system. 'A world-view—explains Nash—is a conceptual scheme by which we consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything we believe and by which we interpret and judge reality.'[24]

The system appears as an ensemble of basic foundational ideas regarding reality that functions as a determinative principle or presupposition.[25] When operative, the system integrates into its inner unity all the parts that may fall into its reach. The worldview designation utilized by Nash suggests that the system includes, for instance, the interpretation of the world. However, the system has additional components, all of them essential to its a priori role. These components include: Being, God, human nature, and knowledge. So far philosophy has taken the initiative in the task of exploring and interpreting the system. The system, then, functions as the absolute or ultimate presupposition[26] for the integration of meaning in the

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22 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and intro. by J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York: the Colonial Press, 1900), 466. He further adds that 'reason cannot permit our knowledge to remain in an unconnected and rhapsodistic state, but requires that the sum of our cognitions should constitute a system' (*ibid.*).

23 Ibid., 467. Frank O'Farrell has given specific attention to the Kantian notion of system ('System and Reason for Kant,' *Gregorianum* 62, 1981, 5–49. The notion of system in Kant is embedded in his own transcendental approach to philosophy. Even when not following Kant's transcendentalism, we should recognize that his analysis of reason's structure uncovers some aspects that are consistent with a phenomenological description of human cognition and therefore can be applied to a formal description of what I call systematism (reason's formal systematicity).

24 Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1988), 24.

25 On presuppositions and their function in reason and system see Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, 52–66.

26 Knowledge works with presuppositions. A presupposition is anything that the cognitive subject brings into the activity of knowledge. Even prejudices play a presuppositional role. A system works within knowledge at the level of presuppositions. Yet the system is an especial kind of ultimate presupposition. It is ultimate, because it can neither be verified nor changed without changing at the same time the science that it grounds. Lionel Rubinoff points out that Collingood recognizes two broad kinds of presuppositions, namely, those within the body of science which

scientific structure of any given science, in our case the science of theology.

As Küng suggested, one reason for the existence of theological fragmentation in postmodern Christian theology is the diversity of paradigms for doing theology.[27] If we ask why are there different interpretations of the scientific structure of theology (paradigms), the answer is: because the task of doing theology requires the interpretation of the scientific structure of theology. The next logical question is: Why are there so many different interpretations of the disciplinary matrix of the same science and not only one instead? Here Küng's reference to the paradigms is not enough. There must be a reason why there are many instead of one understanding of the disciplinary matrix. Küng, within a Hegelian framework, seems to imply that the diversity of paradigms is due to the historical development of science. My suggestion is that the reason for the variety of paradigms in Christian theology resides in another component of the theological a priori, namely the system. Yet, this is not the ultimate level in the theological a priori. An analysis of the system throughout history will soon reveal that there are many systems as well. Then, the obvious question is: why are there so many different systems and not only one? The answer to that query requires a brief explanation of the concept of the system which includes a reference to the systematic nature of human reason, and, to the hypotheticity of the system.

VI. Systematism and System

The system performs one of the more sophisticated functions of human knowledge.[28] The systematic nature of human reason is the

26 (*Continued*) can be verified, and those that pertain not to that body and which are therefore not verifiable. 'These are the *conditions sine quae non* of the science in question' (*Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* [Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1970], 218).

27 According to Küng reasons for the diversity of paradigms are many. They vary according to the historical situation and general development of culture and Church. When describing the various paradigm shifts that have taken place in the history of Christianity Küng uses, among others, philosophical, scientific, ecclesiological, doctrinal, sociological causes.

28 The systematic function of human reason performs the task of associating, connecting and articulating parts into wholes. Pannenberg has given some thought to the role that the categories of part and whole play in natural science, the so-called human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), and theology (*Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, tr. by Philip Clayton [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990], 130–152). The systematic function of reason is the necessary condition for the category of the whole as a composite of parts. Human reason is broader than this characteristic. For an introduction to the analysis of the structure of reason see my *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, chapter I.

formal condition[29] that makes possible the coherent connection of meanings about the plurality of parts involved in any given discourse. Kant brought into view the systematic nature of reason by stating that 'the peculiar business of reason is to arrange them [cognitions] into a *system*, that is to say, to give them connection according to a principle.'[30] Since the articulation of this unity presupposes a grounding idea, reason feels the pressing necessity 'to form some presupposition that shall serve the understanding as a proper basis for the complete determination of its conceptions.'[31] Let us give the term 'systematism' to the systematic role of human reason. Systematism thus defined is the presupposition or condition for the possibility of coherence in any scientific discourse. On the other hand, let us use the term 'system' for the material interpretation of systematism. For instance, one possible way to interpret reason's systematism was chosen by Kant who, following the classical tradition of philosophy, decided to interpret the systematism of reason from what he called 'the immovable rock of the absolutely necessary.'[32] Systematism is the formal side of the system as the scientific matrix is the formal side of the paradigm. When human reason as activity is present, both systematism and system are given and working simultaneously. Systematism and system belong together. The outline below synthesizes the a priori levels of theological inquiry we have been analyzing. Theology, under C2, represents any theological discourse produced by any theological discipline as it attempts to interpret its proper subject matter, namely God and reality as a whole, C1. The task of theology, however, involves a disciplinary matrix, B1, that is, an activity, or better, a complex ensemble of disciplines and methodologies. That activity is subject to technical interpretation. In other words, it can be programmed to function with different definitions of its necessary components, namely, data, subject matter, and methodologies. The interpretation of the disciplinary matrix is called paradigm, B2. It is the paradigm, B2, that conditions the material results of theology. Yet the paradigm itself is an interpretation that assumes a horizon and an activity, namely the system, A2. The system, A2, is the interpretation of reason's highest capability of connecting meanings, namely, systematism, A1. The system, A2, conditions the paradigm, B2. Finally, both A2 and B2 condition the shape and content of theology, C2.
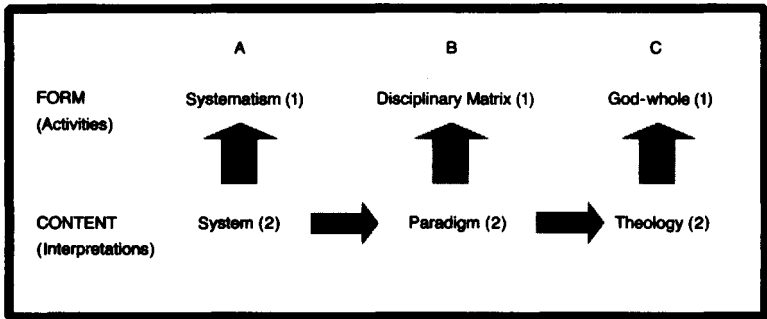
A critical analysis of both systematism and system is called for whenever a human rational activity is involved. Since the task and data

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29 That systematicness is a formal condition does not mean that it is the source of the content of the system, but that it makes any systematic content possible.

30 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 361 (emphasis Kant's).

31 *Ibid.*, 327.

32 *Ibid.*

	A	B	C
FORM (Activities)	Systematism (1)	Disciplinary Matrix (1)	God-whole (1)
CONTENT (Interpretations)	System (2)	Paradigm (2)	Theology (2)

of Christian theology belong to human cognition, a critical analysis of systematism and system is required. The analysis of systematism is formal because it reveals the general components that make possible and are involved in any given theological system. On the other hand, the system is material because it requires the interpretation of the formal systematism of reason. The material analysis of the various theological systems developed throughout history, and the exploration of biblical data regarding contents that may give access to a biblically based interpretation of the formal structure of systematism fall outside the limited purpose of this article.

In the broader sense of rationality we are using, any possible human knowledge, be it scientific or not,[33] is systematic.[34] Otherwise, rationality would mean nothing at all. The difference between scientific and everyday knowledge is not that the former is systematic while the later is asystematic, but, rather, that each works out the systematicness that belongs to its rational essence in a different way. In the field of scientific and philosophical research the systematicness of knowledge turns into a technically and critically developed enterprise that becomes the foundation and tool of science itself,[35] whereas in everyday

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33 Accepting the systematic nature of scientific and philosophical technical thinking is easy. Seeing that the systematic nature of human reason is also present in everyday knowledge may be a little more difficult. Yet, Ludwig Wittgenstein points to the fact that 'when we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions (light dawns gradually over the whole)' (*On Certainty* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], 141). Moreover, 'it is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support' (*Ibid.*, 142). Wittgenstein adds that 'our knowledge forms an enormous system. And only within this system has a particular bit the value we give it' (*Ibid.*, 410).

34 The term 'systematic,' here as elsewhere, is used as an adjective to qualify the result of rational activity, and necessarily involves both systematism and system.

35 Thomas Kuhn broadly refers to the technical development of the systematicness of reason in factual science with the ambiguous use of the term 'paradigm.' By choosing the term 'paradigm,' explains Kuhn, 'I mean to suggest that some accepted

conversation the structure of reason's system remains implicit and hidden from formal analysis and expression. This means that the systematicness of knowledge is present both at the prescientific and scientific levels of cognition. Both the theologian working at the scientific level, and the believer, usually working in the prescientific level, assume the systematism and system in their theological reflections. In order for Christianity to be relevant and powerful both levels must work within the same system.

At this point arises the question regarding whether the system provides the bedrock for absolute knowledge. In other words, is the system, along with the paradigm, the a priori ground on which the plurality of Christian theologies could be brought into a grand universal harmony?

VII. Hypotheticity of the System

Immanuel Kant seems to have recognized the hypothetical nature of reason when he underlined that 'the hypothetical exercise of reason by the aid of ideas employed as problematic conceptions is properly not constitutive. That is to say, if we consider the subject strictly, the truth of the rule, which has been employed as an hypothesis, does not follow from the use that is made of it by reason'[36] In other words the formal structure of reason calls for a principle of articulation that he, following a long tradition, chooses to call God. Yet, in order that the idea of God could perform the task of articulating the whole, it must have a material content. It is that material content, which is not dictated by transcendental reason, which points to the hypothetical nature of reason. Kant's awareness of the presuppositional-hypothetical-systematic nature of reason has influenced modern epistemology. The hypotheticity of the system flows from the hypotheticity of rationality.[37] By hypotheticity of the system I mean that reason, in its search for the principles on which the system produces the articulation of the mean-

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35 (*Continued*) examples of actual scientific practice—examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together—provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research' (Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 10). The 'acquisition of a paradigm and of the more esoteric type of research it permits is a sign of maturity in the development of any given scientific field' (*ibid.*, 11).

36 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 375.

37 Kant did not understand the system or reason to be 'hypothetical' in the sense I am suggesting. For Kant there is a hypothetical usage of reason but this happens when the 'ideas' or principles of reason are considered as problematic (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 362), and not as certain because of their transcendental deduction (*ibid.*, 375). When working on the basis of the transcendental interpretation, however, Kant held that reason is not producing hypothetical but necessary results.

ing of the whole, is not able to arrive at one necessary interpretation of them. Kant seems to have worked under the illusion that reason is able to reach a necessary understanding of its systematic principle. On the contrary, being the product of human interpretation, the system always works on the basis of a contingent and hypothetical interpretation of the systematicness of reason and its principle of articulation. In other words, the system's contents are the product of human conscious determination and explanation.[38] This being the case, we can provide different contents for the requirements of reason's systematism. Reason's systematism demands coherence and unity. To satisfy such a demand reason requires the use of some foundational ideas, first principles, or presuppositions. Still, the actual content of such principles is constituted by reason itself. Said contents constitute the system. Then, the system is the creation of reason itself, and therefore is not absolute but only a 'possible' way to look at reality in search of its meaning. That is why and how all rational systems are hypothetical in nature.

Two main aspects of the a priori level in which we are analyzing the system call for its hypotheticity. These aspects are, the subject matter that the system articulates, and the instrument through which that subject matter is handled, namely reason. The subject matter that the system brings into knowledge is of the broadest possible nature, namely, reality as a whole. Due to the broadness and complexity of the subject matter a unified necessary interpretation of the a priori principles of the system seems quite unlikely. Moreover, the instrument used in developing the meaning of such a broad and complex subject matter, namely reason, functions in an interpretative mode based on its own spontaneity.[39] Human reason can produce only hypothetical

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38 When Kant undertakes the transcendental deduction of the ultimate principles of reason (transcendental ideas) he recognizes that a transcendental idea 'is merely a schema constructed according to the necessary conditions of the unity of reason' (ibid., 376). Thus, the ideas are not deduced but constructed, that is, created by human imagination with the purpose to justify the claim that scientific rational knowledge is necessary. Kant's procedure in the transcendental deduction of the ultimate principles (ideas) of reason reveals that his view on reason is only a possible interpretation of the systematism of reason. O'Farrell agrees with the opinion that Kant 'gives us a new interpretation of reason governing the whole sphere of its knowing' (40). Kant's analysis implicitly shows that reason is not able to produce a single interpretation of its ultimate principles. Explicitly, however, Kant did not build his thought on the hypothetical nature of reason that his analysis of transcendental ideas implicitly suggests. Only when we come to see that the conception of reason itself falls within the realm of hermeneutics we realize its hypothetical nature.

39 The activity of knowledge is a subject object relationship. Traditionally, the subject was considered to be passive. Knowledge was the 'objective' reproduction of the object in the passive cognitive subject. For systematic reasons, for whose consideration this is neither the place nor time, this position bypassed the contribution of the cognitive subject to the constitution of meaning. This contribution includes the

interpretations of any object or subject matter that it handles.[40] Because the system is one of these, the result cannot be other than an interpretation, and, as such, only a hypothetical possibility. Other interpretations of reason's systematism with the same rational claim to truth are always possible.[41] So, mutually exclusive interpretations of

39 (*Continued*) spontaneity of the subject. This means that the subject, as knower, brings to the relationship of knowledge his or her own ideas that shape both the form and the content of the meaning that is to be constituted. Thus, the subject also contributes to the act of knowing. A phenomenological analysis of the act of knowledge in which the spontaneity of the subject appears as a constitutive component of the act of knowledge itself is developed by N. Hartmann (1.5.c.). The spontaneity of the subject means that the subject participates creatively in the constitution of meanings, and therefore, that an interpretative dimension is included in the very essence of knowledge.

40 David Tracy, dealing with this issue from the starting point of linguistic analysis and the function of language in communication, points out the hypothetical dimension of any possible knowledge in the following way: 'Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret.' And, he adds, 'whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter' (*Plurality and Ambiguity. Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989], 9). This level of hypotheticity or interpretation is being recognized in the development of factual sciences as they enter in their post-positivistic stage. 'The examples are by now familiar: quantum theory, the discovery of such uncannily Joycean phenomena as quarks, the acknowledgment of the role of the scientific interpreter in all experiment, the realization that all data are theory-laden. More recently, less familiar examples have also been observed: the role of imagination, metaphor, and metonymy in scientific inquiry itself; the insistence among postpositivist philosophers of science on the historical context of all scientific paradigms (Kuhn) and the topical, and thereby historical, character of all scientific arguments (Toulmin). In all these developments, former scientistic claims to ahistorical certainty and nonhermeneutical insights have collapsed. Science has become again both historical and hermeneutical' (*Ibid.*, 33). Hans Küng recognizes the same development in these words: 'nowhere, not even in natural science, can the human subject, the researcher himself, be eliminated in the name of absolute objectivity. The information obtained by the scientist and technician as already been hermeneutically elaborated: It has already been limited to answering the question posed of it. And finally modern physics, in connection with the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, has called attention to the fact that the findings of natural science are valid in themselves but only under quite specific conditions and not under others. Even in physics experiments, the method alerts the object; it always reflects only one perspective and only one aspect' (*Theology for the Third Millennium*, 129–130).

41 Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of the role of a priori presuppositions in the constitution of belief systems pointed to the ultimate hypotheticity of rational absolute presuppositions. Shawn Joseph Mintek commenting on Wittgenstein's thought explains that 'some beliefs are 'ground-floor' and cannot be questioned, given up, or modified rationally, because they serve as paradigms and standards of rationality. They serve as the framework of a belief-system and determine the sorts of inquiry and questioning that one can legitimately and intelligibly carry out. Even though they are not justified or known, nothing is more certain than these rock bottom beliefs according to Wittgenstein' ('Rationality and Absolute Presuppositions' [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1977], 57). It seems that Wittgenstein was able to see that there is no way for reason to choose between final absolute systematic presuppositions. See Grace Jantzen, 'Epistemology, Religious Experience and Religious Belief,' (*Modern Theology* 4, 1987, 277–1).

reason's systematism have been produced. Reason's nature, therefore, does not allow a final identification of any system as the absolute one. The hypotheticity of reason, and of the system as concrete interpretation of reason's systematism, reveal the ultimate unavoidable relativism of any philosophical or theological system.[42]

The hypotheticity of reason may be one of the most important epistemological discoveries of postmodernism. Classicism and modernism firmly presupposed the absolute powers of reason. Classical and modern thinkers believed that human reason provided them with true and absolute knowledge. Postmodernity, on the contrary, as a result of the work of critical epistemologists such as Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, does not longer share such confidence. Critical epistemological studies point out that reason can no longer reach absolute certainty but only what Tracy calls 'relative adequacy.'[43] Cognitive certainty is out; 'relative adequacy' is in. Such conviction implies systematic and disciplinary changes that upset the scientific mind-set not only of modernity but of the whole classical tradition of western civilization. This change is so radical that it will take a long time for scientists and theologians to integrate it into their disciplinary matrix.[44] Thinkers accepting the new limited understanding of reason are, among others, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Tracy, and, Küng.[45]

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42 Richard Tarnas has perceptively pointed out that deconstructive-eliminative postmodern criticism has unveiled the long concealed fact that 'the fund of data available to the human mind is of such intrinsic complexity and diversity that it provides plausible support for many different conceptions of the ultimate nature of reality. The human being must therefore choose among a multiplicity of potentially viable options and whatever option is chosen will in turn affect both the nature of reality and the choosing subject' (*The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped our World View* [New York: Ballantine, 1993], 398–399).

43 'For relative adequacy is just that: relative, not absolute, adequacy. If one demands certainty, one is assured of failure. We can never possess absolute certainty. But we can achieve a good—that is, a relatively adequate—interpretation: relative to the power of disclosure and concealment of the text, relative to the skills and attentiveness of the interpreter, relative to the kind of conversation possible for the interpreter in a particular culture at a particular time' (Tracy, 22–23). See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Putnam, 1929).

44 This fact is beginning to be recognized and incorporated at the level of factual sciences. Thomas Kuhn in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* develops the results of this discovery at the level of factual sciences. Theory, and therefore interpretation belongs to the essence of factual scientific knowledge. The contribution of the creativity of the subject, that is, the spontaneity of the subject, according to Hartmann analysis, is being finally recognized.

45 It seems that according to Küng truth is not relativized by the hypotheticity of reason. For him there are not many possible theologies but only one. For instance, he says that 'the only theology that can be a theology for today is the one that engages itself critically and constructively in the experiences of modern humanity, which finds itself in the transition from modernity to postmodernity' (*Theology for the Third Millennium*, 197). Küng's Hegelian interpretation of the historical development of different schools or paradigms in Christian theology shows a systematic structure

The hypotheticity of the system at the level of first principles for understanding has not yet been integrated to the task of doing theology.[46] At the level of ultimate a priori principles, consciously or unconsciously, theologians tend to assume a unified system. On one hand, postmodern theology seems to depart from tradition by adopting a new more realistic understanding of the capabilities of reason. Yet, on the other hand, a number of postmodern theologians work uncritically assuming that reason can still provide the ultimate ground for a true unified philosophical-scientific perspective. At this ultimate foundational level, we find the basic divide between constructive and deconstructive postmodernism. Constructive postmodernism maintains that science and philosophy are endowed with the unabated power of reason for reaching ultimate truth. Deconstructive postmodernism[47] abandons this conviction (pure reason) and replaces it with a view that recognizes reason working within the limitations proper to the contingent level of reality (historical reason).[48] That Christian theologians

45   (*Continued*) working and determining the interpretation of both what truth is and the process through which it is discovered (*Does God Exist?* [New York: Vintage Books, 1980]). This can be appreciated, for instance, in his conception of the 'fundamental continuity' that exists when a paradigm is replaced by another (*Theology*, 153–155). He quotes approvingly from Stephen Toulmin in order to point out that 'competing paradigms never really boil down to totally mutually incompatible world pictures' (*ibid.*). What is relativized is the process of finding out that truth. Here Küng's Catholicism shows up. Tradition is the basis for understanding even the gospel. There is no way in which the worldview of tradition could be completely modified. It can only be criticized in the way of evolutionary improvement. As it can be perceived, hypotheticity at the foundational level of the system has no place in Küng's view. At heart he appears to be a classical thinker. He does not follow the critical consequences of contemporary epistemology to their ultimate consequences, namely, relativism and uncertainty. He does not need to. His position is rationally viable. The problem is that there are many more positions equally viable from a rational perspective. Absolute harmonization of worldviews is not possible on a rational basis. The problem of foundational contradiction at the rock bottom level of system will confront us sooner or later.

46   Heidegger, Tracy, and, Derrida in the deconstructionist critical approach to philosophy seem to bring the results of the hypotheticity of the system to its ultimate unavoidable consequences. In theology Mark C. Taylor appears as forerunner exploring the shape of theology when the hypotheticity of reason and system are accepted as undisputed fact.

47   D. R. Griffin recognizes the existence of deconstructive and constructive postmodernism. See D. R. Griffin, W. Beardslee, and, J. Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1989), xii.

48   Classical and modern approaches differ from postmodern ones in the way they interpret the role of reason in the grasping of truth. Postmodernity has become aware of both the limits and historicity of reason. Consequently, an absolute access to truth becomes impossible. Truth is always in the process of being achieved and grasped through a historical process. Past interpretations did not achieve a complete and absolute understanding of ultimate truth. They are only 'relatively adequate.' The same is held for any present interpretation of ultimate systematic truth. Thus, there is a plurality of systems and paradigms all of them partially true and therefore adequate, and at the same time, all of them partially incomplete and therefore inadequate.

could embrace the hypotheticity of reason and still claim absolute truth on a rational basis remains to be seen.

Not a small number of Christian theologians still seem to assume that there is one truth and that human beings can have access to it on the basis of the powers of reason. For them, contradictory ways of understanding are not due to the nature of the truth or to the hypotheticity of the system with which we are bound to understand reality, but to the limitation of our instrument for grasping it, namely reason. So, constructive or revisionist theological postmodernism still conceals within itself the classical ideal that rational truth is necessary, and therefore one. This leads to ideological pluralism: in the grand harmonious scheme of truth and reality all interpretations are complementary. There is one grand schema of truth of which each known system of theology and science are but partial components. This view assumes the traditional oneness of reality and reason, yet the presupposition of a grand unity of all interpretations stands only as an illusion working beyond the level of reason and system. The unity of the various systems of truth cannot be grounded by the same reason. Beyond reason, imagination creates an ideology which is called to play the role of ultimate principle for grounding a grand harmonious unity of the fragmentation of truth produced by the limitations of historical reason.

The question then is: Is the conception of a unified field, within which all paradigms and theological interpretations could become parts of a grand harmonious whole (ideological pluralism), possible, or, should we recognize that the nature of our cognition only allows us to arrive at various mutually exclusive ways of understanding the same whole and its inner logic? Is Küng's appeal to develop a new theological paradigm a way to overcome the divisive fragmentation of Christian theologies and communities, or, a way to conceal a deeper problem?

VIII. System and Pluralism

In theological circles the word 'pluralism' is used in a wide range of meanings.[49] Among them it is possible to differentiate between ideological, asystematic and systematic pluralisms. Let us say that ideological pluralism occurs when various theological positions

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49 For instances of the way in which some Roman Catholic theologians are facing the issue of theological pluralism, see Claude Geffré, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and Virgil Elizondo, *Different Theologies, Common Responsibility: Babel or Pentecost?* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984).

assume a broader unified framework of reference in relation to which they become partial yet complementary components of the whole of meaning.[50] A segment of theological postmodernism works within the context of ideological pluralism. Here, pluralism is not understood as reaching the foundations of rationality and system, but only as reaching the various historically limited and conditioned ways of partially grasping the various facets of the whole system of truth. Constructive pluralism embraces this conviction. Contemporary ecumenism develops within the boundaries of ideological pluralism of which Küng is a representative. The issue of the ultimate systematic foundations of truth is not brought into critical analysis to avoid facing the possibility of theological division that might jeopardize the practical outcome of religious ecumenical rapprochement.

Let us use the term 'asystematic pluralism' for the belief that claims that there is no ultimate center or ground that could integrate a grand harmonious systematic articulation of the whole. The ultimate nature of the whole of reality is not the one but the infinite fragmentation of reality. There is no system of truth but only the shifting sand of infinite change. The reason why philosophers, scientists, and theologians would rather stay within an ideological pluralistic view of reality as a whole than accept the basic premise of asystematic pluralism is understandable. To follow the hypotheticity and spontaneity of reason to their logical consequences demands a reinterpretation of ultimate presuppositions, that is, of the system as interpretation of reason's systematism. Philosophers and scientists are reluctant to follow this path because they know that such criticism amounts to the annihilation of the philosophical and scientific avenue into the search for a final and absolute meaning of life and the whole of reality. If these epistemological convictions are accepted philosophy and science would have to rescind their claim of being the only way to truth. A few theologians, embracing the convictions of deconstructive postmodernism, are trying to build Christian theology on the new foundation of absolute

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50 This option is exercised by a high percentage of theologians advocating ecumenism in its broader sense of including not only Christian denominations but all religions in general. This position is based on the conviction that all the versions of Christian theology and all religions are partial theoretical expressions of a non-cognitive experiential ground (see for instance Eugene Hillman, *Many Paths: A Catholic Approach to Religious Pluralism* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989], 46–49; and, Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982], 85–87). In this way this ideology openly recognizes that within the theoretical level there is no way in which all Christian and non-Christian theological positions could be brought into one grand harmonious whole. Ideological pluralism, then, brings all theoretical positions together on a non-theoretical cognitive basis. This position begs the epistemological question we are dealing with here.

uncertainty. In this project, philosophy and science become possible alternate ways into truth falling short from reaching the Cartesian ideal of absolute certainty. The asystematic pluralism of deconstructive postmodernism recognizes the failure of some twenty four centuries of searching for truth in the wrong direction, with the wrong tools, and on the wrong foundation.

Let us use the term 'systematic pluralism' for the view that recognizes the fact that reason can only produce different contradictory interpretations of the ultimate system of truth. The ultimate ground of meaning can never be absolutely corroborated by reason as necessary. Kant's epistemological illusion consisted in the belief that such corroboration was possible. Modernism built on such illusion. Postmodern structural systematic pluralism accepts that reason cannot produce final absolute arguments to choose one interpretation of its systematic principles out of many possible ones. In order for reason to perform its role scientists, philosophers and theologians are bound to choose and use one of many interpretations of reason's systematic principles. In recognizing the unavoidable existence of truly contradictory systems of rationality, structural pluralism becomes pluralistic in a radical and disturbing way.

When systematic pluralism is recognized, philosophy and science cease to hold their age-old privileged position as absolute ways into ultimate truth. In the context of systematic pluralism they become possible ways to undertake the task of interpreting the ultimate principles of reason and the system of truth. However, the result of their inquiries could never render a final, certain, and necessary way into the ultimate ground of rational truth. Their roles in theology, then, stand in need of reevaluation and reinterpretation. Theologians cannot longer take philosophical and scientific teachings as foundations to reach universal ultimate truth. Postmodern Christian theology, working within the parameters of systematic pluralism, should engage in a task of demythologizing the traditional role that philosophy and science have played in the constitution of Christian teachings and beliefs.

Our brief reference to the system has revealed its basic role as ultimate ground for intelligibility in science and theology. The system functions as the necessary structure of ultimate presuppositions or first principles required for the constitution of any coherent teaching or knowledge. The system is not an optional luxury. Without it there is no meaning and no intellectual basis for the scientific development of what Küng calls paradigm. Both the teachings and scientific structures of Christian theology receive their ultimate foundation at the level of the system. Yet, this level has so far escaped, at least within theology,

from necessary critical investigation.[51] In this sense, then, the whole development of Christian theology has occurred under the uncritical adoption of various interpretations of the systematic structure of both reason and science.

However, even if made uncritically, the concrete choice of content for the system must be made. Reason's structure requires it. Human life also requires it as framework for the constitution of meaning. Yet, reason does not arrive at one absolute interpretation of the system but many instead. The ultimate ground for choosing between the many interpretations of the meaning of the system cannot be provided either by reason, philosophy, or science. When, from the range of possible interpretations of the meaning of reality the cognitive subject finally has to choose one, that choice is never absolutely certain in a rational sense. 'Faith' necessarily intervenes.[52] Yet, 'faith' here is not saving personal faith as in Christianity. In this epistemological context faith means to accept a given choice, even when a final absolute rational ground for it is unattainable. This choice is unavoidable because we need it to make sense in our everyday life and scientific endeavors. Can our civilization keep on deciding its destiny on the basis of either ideological or asystematic pluralisms? Or, should the critical way be extended to the level of the ultimate system of presuppositions, no matter what changes in our self-understanding and scientific ways systematic pluralism may require?

That our scientific ways are in deep crisis has been underlined by

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51 It may be argued that Kant was the first to point in this direction at least theoretically, since he did not challenge the content of the first principles of understanding. He only began with a formal criticism of the epistemological principles involved. Metaphysical principles or ontological principles are not criticized but assumed in Kant's critiques. In the theoretical level, however, he points to postmodern times when remarking that 'we can only learn to philosophize; in other words, we can only exercise our powers of reasoning in accordance with general principles, retaining at the same time, the right of investigating the sources of these principles, of testing, and even rejecting them' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 2.3 [471]). It is to be noticed, that Kant grasped the possibility of 'investigating,' 'testing,' and 'rejecting,' these 'general principles,' but not the possibility of reinterpreting them. For Kant that would be impossible since they are necessary and a priori.

52 According to Kant and Wittgenstein, for instance these absolute presuppositions (system) that are the necessary condition for both theoretical and practical knowledge are not 'knowledge' (Mintek, 48). For Wittgenstein 'not to know background propositions' or 'absolute presuppositions' does not mean to 'ignore' them or that they lie in the realm of unconsciousness. It rather seems to mean that they lie in a different realm of knowledge, the realm of the grounding of meaning (Canale, *Criticism*, 55 n. 2). Commenting on Kant, Karl Jaspers explains that 'Without pure rational faith, the use of reason becomes either the pretension to universal knowledge (pansophy) or misology, the suicide of reason' (*The Great Philosophers: The Foundations* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962], 312).

Husserl[53] and Merleau-Ponty.[54] In a series of poignant questions Heidegger recognizes the crisis of our civilization and the need for a radical new beginning.

> Do we stand in the very twilight of the most monstrous transformation our planet has ever undergone, the twilight of that epoch in which the earth itself hangs suspended? Do we confront the evening of a night which heralds another dawn? Are we to strike off on a journey to this historic region of earth's evening? Is the land of evening [Western world, Europe] only now emerging? Will this land of evening overwhelm Occident and Orient alike, transcending whatever is merely European to become the location of a new, more primordially fated history? Are we men of today already 'Western' in a sense that first crystallizes in the course of our passage into the world's night? What can all merely historiological philosophies of history tell us about our history if they only dazzle us with surveys of its sedimented stuff; if they explain history without ever thinking out, from the essence of history, in turn, from Being itself? Are we the latecomers we are? But are we also at the same time precursors of the dawn of an altogether different age, which has already left our contemporary historiological representations of history behind?[55]

If philosophy and science cannot cast an absolute foundation for their own scientific enterprise why should Christian theology still follow their definitions? Shouldn't Christian theology search for a new beginning that being 'true' will not turn up to be just another starting point which after another twenty centuries would end in a failure as great as the one facing both western and global civilizations?

IX. Conclusion

The epistemological distinction between paradigm and system seems to suggest that the explanation of theological pluralism and its possible overcoming finds its a priori ground on the side of the system. The hypothetical and hermeneutical nature of the system, however, places under suspicion any attempt at overcoming theological pluralism based on the ground of reason. Ideological pluralism, closely related to conservative and revisionist postmodern theologies, draws the content of the ultimate principle of systematic articulation not from reason but from imagination. On this basis, the attempt at overcoming

53 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
54 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les sciences de l'homme et la phenomenologie* (Paris: Sorbone, 1967).
55 'The Anaximander Fragment,' in *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 17.

theological pluralism by way of a universal ecumenical theology is imaginary as well. If reason is bound to render a plurality of interpretations of the first principle of systematicness, so is imagination. Asystematic pluralism, closely associated with deconstructive postmodern theologies, simply rejects the possibility of overcoming theological pluralism by affirming the fragmentary nature of ultimate reality. This being the case theological pluralism and relativism become the goal to achieve rather than the object to overcome. Reason cannot help Christian theology to overcome theological pluralism.

Can Christian theology overcome the forces that fragment it? Ideological pluralism, widely accepted these days, creates the illusion of theological unity. Yet, imagination is bound to produce more than one interpretation of the system. Asystematic pluralism accepts the ultimate fragmentation of reality and knowledge. Systematic pluralism recognizes that reason is able to produce various, yet coherent and harmonious, interpretations of the whole of reality. Is it possible to overcome the plurality of interpretations of the whole that result from systematic pluralism? What seems certain is that we must attempt the task of overcoming theological pluralism at its systematic level from a ground other than reason. Christian theology recognizes, besides reason, other major sources of theology and authority, namely, revelation, experience, and, tradition. It appears to me that the task of overcoming theological pluralism should be grounded on one of them. Due to its essential subjectivity religious experience seems not suited for the task. In relation to the understanding of first principles of theological systematicness tradition, can only draw from the other three sources. Consequently, the overcoming of theological pluralism can only be attempted from the realm of divine revelation as recorded in Scripture. Christian theology, then, must formulate anew the question of the meaning of revelation as the starting point that may lead us to discover the way in which divine revelation has interpreted the systematicity of reason.

Abstract

This article explores the contents of the theological a priori and their bearings on the phenomenon of theological pluralism. I suggest that the phenomenon of theological pluralism necessarily follows from the limitations proper to the nature of human reason. I start by distinguishing between Hans Küng's notion of paradigm and the concept of system. Both belong to the theological a priori involved in the constitution of theological interpretations. Paradigm becomes the methodological portion of the theological a priori, while the system provides the ultimate foundations for meaning and truth. Next, I argue that,

since reason can only provide various and even conflicting views of the ultimate hermeneutical principles of meaning (system), Christian theology cannot avoid inner fragmentation or theological pluralism. Finally, I propose that theological pluralism can be theologically overcome when the contents of the system are interpreted from the ground provided by biblical revelation.

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