

THE STATUS OF THE ANOMALY IN THE FEMINIST GOD-TALK OF ROSEMARY RUETHER

by George Alfred James

Abstract. Scripture, the creeds, and tradition have provided the raw material that theology has attempted to refine. The contribution of much recent theology comes from new insight into these materials by women, blacks, and the Third World, often as examined by analytic tools derived from post-Christian ideologies. The theology of Rosemary Ruether stands out because of her choice of sources, among which she includes documents excoriated as heretical by what she calls the patriarchal orthodoxy of the early Christian church. Because of this it is useful to examine this type of theology in relation to other theological inquiries of recent years. The thesis of this paper is that, in her ability to incorporate source material hitherto regarded as heretical, Ruether has demonstrated the scientific character of this kind of theology.

Keywords: feminist theology; theology and science; Rosemary Ruether; anomalies; Nag Hammadi; Gnosticism.

The fact that feminist theology might qualify as science in some narrow or extended sense might be among the least of reasons for taking it seriously. Indeed, for many feminist writers the scientific establishment has lent as much support as any other to the patriarchal status quo. Nevertheless, to the extent that theology makes rational use of its sources and offers claims about the actual world, it raises the question (deliberately or not) of how its statements stand in the light of fundamental canons of empirical research. The status of such claims becomes especially important when a theological program

George Alfred James is assistant professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas 76203. An earlier version of this paper appeared in *Contemporary Philosophy* 12 (January): 10-16.

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confronts an established theological tradition from which it differs on such fundamental consideration as sources, method, and its model of the divine reality.

The theology of Rosemary Ruether stands out among recent theologies by her choice of sources, among which she includes documents that have been declared heretical by what she calls the patriarchal orthodoxy of the early Christian church. Our thesis is that in its incorporation of source material regarded as heretical, Ruether's theology displays an important feature of a scientific undertaking, to which theology has often aspired.

This approach raises a number of issues of interest to studies in theology and science, and asks questions about feminist theology in a context different from that in which feminist issues are usually raised. It tends to discredit the presumption that it is primarily in the apologetic function of theology that issues of theology versus science are most crucial. Rather, it suggests that such issues are relevant to the dogmatic function of theology, wherein the faith community seeks to articulate its self-understanding. It suggests, in fact, that restriction of theology and science to the apologetic function of theology can be maintained only by a complete blindness to the challenge that feminist theology presents to traditional theological research.

I

When theology was the "Queen of Sciences," her domain was very different from the realm we identify as science today. The foundation for modern sciences was a metaphysic in which causes included purposes and forms, and whose principles were laid down as requisite and regulative for the acquisition of knowledge. Under the hegemony of theology, the sciences pointed to the existence and unity of God, by whose providence the world could be conceived as our home. In contrast, the principles of modern science are not prescriptive for the manner in which knowledge is acquired; they are abstracted from the observations of persons engaged in the acquisition of scientific knowledge. Modern science offers explanations of data by efficient causes, and generally works with nonpersonal models. It raises a great number of issues for theology: the relation of theological investigation to scientific research, the relation of theological formulations to explanatory hypotheses and alternative explanations, and the referentiality and testability of theological statements, as well as their criteria. Besides the many issues that modern science raises for theology, feminist theology draws attention to the falsifiability of theological formulations, and especially to the manner in which theo-

logical research deals with data anomalous to its explanatory schemes.

In his essay "The Debate about God: Victorian Relevance and Contemporary Irrelevance" (1969), Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that, despite ethnographic theory since Levi-Bruhl, there is still a fundamental difference between primitive modes of thought and the modes characteristic of science since the seventeenth century. Referring to *Purity and Danger* (by Mary Douglas), he observes that primitive thought is reluctant to tolerate what is exceptional or anomalous to established taxonomic schemes. Douglas discredits the view that whatever occurs in primitive societies occurs because it functions in material terms. She demonstrates, for example, that we misconstrue primitive rules and rituals pertaining to pollution if we look for a merely hygienic rationale behind them. The primitive's idea of dirt or uncleanness is essentially a concept of disorder, of something that does not fit, of matter out of place, and his rites of purification are to prevent these things-out-of-order from doing harm, to neutralize their disruptive power. Thus these rites enable the primitive to cope with what is out of order without having to revise his system of classification. Furthermore, MacIntyre suggests, if we set this concept of primitive thought beside Karl Popper's view of modern science, we can see that each is the "photographic negative" of the other. For Popper, a scientific theory is acceptable if it is falsifiable in principle yet not falsified in fact: a theory is most acceptable as science that is most falsifiable but not yet falsified (MacIntyre 1969, 7 ff. See also Douglas 1966; Popper 1959; Kuhn 1970; Lakatos 1978; Hefner 1988; and Murphy 1987).

Scientific theory, to put it differently, permits anomalous data to stand against the explanations it offers. The scientist accepts the anomaly as the basis for either revising or abandoning the theory he or she has hitherto accepted. In primitive thought, on the other hand, anomalous data may be more than sufficient to falsify an explanatory theory, but primitive thought is not prepared to permit such data to stand against it. Primitive man acknowledges the anomaly, but only in order to place it out of limits.

One of the great crises of theism, according to MacIntyre, is the disjunction between these two modes of thought. Theism, he argues, developed in the intellectual environment of a prescientific culture, and in this context it was not without believable content. In short, if God did not exist, the observable world would be different—and it was generally held that nothing was likely to occur to place this belief in question. This primitive theism was not unfalsifiable in the positivist sense; it was simply irrefutable in the Popperian sense.

Anomalous data were not yet sufficient to falsify the explanatory scheme. Thus the emergence of science in the seventeenth century could not but create a crisis.

When the issue of refutability is raised, according to MacIntyre, the theist is faced with two alternatives: (1) he (or she) can exhibit the evidence that purports to confirm his belief, or (2) he (or she) can retain the belief by separating it from secular culture. In the first option, the belief acquires factual content at the cost of acquiring the same vulnerability to revision or replacement as any other hypothesis. If the belief is that God is the First Cause, who introduces motion into a system of material bodies, as in Newton's *Scholium*, it is vulnerable, on the one hand, to the view of Laplace, who finds no need for such a hypothesis, and, on the other hand, to the view of J. S. Mill, who requires a further cause to account for the existence of the first one. In the second option, the belief is preserved intact, but only by becoming a belief apart, without any claim to intellectual legitimacy and with a very dubious relation to the rest of cultural life.

The crisis of theism that arose with the emergence of science in the seventeenth century can be seen, according to MacIntyre, as a debate whether theism should present itself as scientific—that is, capable of revision and therefore, perhaps, of conversion into Deism—or separate itself from culture in order to become a matter of the heart. MacIntyre sees this tension in Pascal's critique of deistic belief, which Pascal saw as remote from Christianity as atheism. Having rejected the option of treating theistic propositions as scientific language, Pascal confronted an interlocutor with a theism that cannot be refuted or confirmed. He submits no arguments from the nature of the universe, such as those of Aquinas or Locke; he offers his opponent the simple choice elaborated in his doctrine of the wager—a notion that MacIntyre regards as *the* innovation in the history of theism—which makes Pascal, in MacIntyre's view, the precursor both of Kierkegaard and Barth.

Studies in the history of science by such persons as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend indicate that what distinguishes science from other forms of thought is not so clear as Popper's analysis would suggest. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), Kuhn observes that scientific research is often resistant to the anomalous and the exceptional, that it tends to protect its theory from revision or from being discarded, even in the face of evidence. In his work *Against Method* (1978), Feyerabend suggests that such resistance discredits the notion that scientific research follows specifiable rules in its acquisition of knowledge. It is Kuhn's view that a scientific paradigm is likely to be held until sufficient anomalous data accumulate to spark a

revolution in scientific theory that will bring about a paradigm shift. For him, an explanatory theory is superior to a previous explanatory theory if it (the former) explains more of the anomalous data, leaving less unexplained.

Recently Imre Lakatos, discussing the rationality of scientific investigation, focused not on science as a whole but on competing research programs. In his work *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs* (1978), he holds that such scientific programs are characterized by a "hard core" of explanatory theory that is surrounded by a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses. It is this protective belt, in the view of Lakatos, that normally is modified to accommodate problematic and exceptional data. He maintains that it is legitimate to pursue and defend a central theoretical formulation, because without it, science could not exist; and he offers criteria for choosing between competing programs, according to the theoretical maneuvers that characterize their activity. A scientific research program, in his view, can be empirically progressive or degenerative—degenerative if its core theory is supported by mere ad hoc modifications of the protective belt. Such changes would tend to defend the central core against only one or a small set of anomalies, in which case the program is more occupied with protecting its hard core than with predicting new and unexpected facts. A research program is empirically progressive when modifications of the theory, both in its hard core and its auxiliary hypotheses, preserve the content of the previous program but exceed the previous theory in corroborated content by its anticipation of dramatic and unexpected facts. Competing research programs, in the view of Lakatos, are to be judged on their progressive record.

In all three of these views the manner in which an anomaly is dealt with is critical in distinguishing what is acceptable from what is unacceptable as science.

We know, of course, that resistance to the revision of beliefs, which Mary Douglas attributes to primitive thought, was not defeated with the advent of natural science. MacIntyre's insight, derived from her research, has been expressed in different ways by a number of researchers in anthropology who have found the same tendencies in modern humanity. Mircea Eliade believes that ancient and traditional humanity desired to live as close as possible to sacred objects because they provided a fixed point in otherwise disorganized and chaotic space. Here orientation was possible, and a world—in the sense of cosmos—was founded. Beyond this sacred, inhabited world is a space that shares in the fluid modality of chaos, where, in the absence of the sacred, in the absence of an ordering center, no

orientation is possible. The space beyond our world is seen as a hostile environment, populated by symbols of the chaos before the creation that still threatens the order of the world in which we reside: ghosts, demons, evil spirits, foreigners. Persons and things outside our world are the anomaly, the exceptional; they are representatives of a space that does not conform to the world as we understand it (Eliade 1959, 204, 20–65. See also van Gennep 1972, 25 ff.).

Earlier, among traditional societies, van Gennep observed rituals in which strangers or persons who had traveled beyond the familiar world were purified of the harmful effect of their contact with the space beyond. The stranger or the person who had traveled beyond the parameters of the ordered world—that is, the exceptional—could be admitted into a village only after he had been ritually discharged of his disruptive power. Of particular interest to Eliade is the fact that many traces of such behavior in ancient and traditional humanity survive in the modern, desacralized world. This raises the question whether a secular version of this ancient conception of the cosmos might not stand behind the resistance to revision that is evident even in modern science. We observe, for instance, that classical Marxism, Freudianism, and Darwinism have displayed remarkable resistance to revision in the light of anomalous data—as have some of the most celebrated scientific theories of our day (Gunter 1980, 7–24).

II

If acceptance of the anomaly is an ideal of scientific thinking, such openness would seem to be a reasonable (though not the sole) criterion for adjudicating the claim of any undertaking that wears the badge of science. In the early part of this century it was Karl Barth who reaffirmed, against what he took as the intellectually compromised currents of nineteenth-century religious thought, that theology *had* to be a science. He held that his efforts toward building a science of the Church, by the Church, and for the Church conformed to the clearest criteria that science, in the broadest sense of the word, could reasonably offer. I wish to argue that Barth's theological project presents itself as a scientific undertaking in terms compatible with the criteria above, where the anomaly and the exceptional are accepted not simply to be declared out of limits, but as the basis for the revision, or even rejection, of theological propositions. I will argue, secondly, that a theology that attempts to hold to this ideal finds itself in crisis in consequence of recent study of the New Testament and Christian origins, a crisis roughly analogous to that of theism as it encountered the natural sciences in the seventeenth

century. I will also argue that the feminist theology of Rosemary Ruether offers an authentically scientific response to this crisis, inasmuch as it allows the exceptional and anomalous (which research is uncovering) to revise and reconstitute the theological project.

It is sometimes heard that Barth's designation of theology as science arises from the English translation of the German word *Wissenschaft* and that, because *Wissenschaft* does not imply more than a "reasoned path" or "discipline," his use of the term should not be taken to mean what is usually meant in English by the word science. Barth's justification for his use of this term, however, gives a very different impression. Although Barth holds that theology is under no obligation to jeopardize its purpose because of what the word science can mean elsewhere or what other sciences do, he argues that theology qualifies as a science that stands among other sciences in three important ways: (1) it is a human effort toward apprehension of a definite object of knowledge; (2) its pursuit of its object follows a definite and consistent path; and (3) it is accountable for this path to itself and to everyone who is capable of seeking its object and, therefore, of following its path.

Barth also insists that theology must be a science in the sense that it must not proceed arbitrarily, but under the guidance of a standard of truth. Among his criticisms of nineteenth-century evangelical theology is his view that, in its effort to remain open to the world, it ascribed a normative character to the ideas and standards of its environment. As a result, it made reductions and oversimplifications and it became forgetful and careless in Christian understanding. It assumed that theology could defend its cause only within a framework that commanded universal recognition. It attempted to work in the narrow worldview in which the Christian message can stake an intellectual claim only on the basis of "feeling for the infinite" or the "religious a priori" and can be defended only in terms of individual self-awareness and personal "spiritual" life. Theology in the nineteenth century, he argued, had surrendered its scientific status by compromising its guiding standard (Barth 1960, 18ff.).

Paradoxically, because it *is* a science, theology cannot be "just like" any other science, for another science cannot produce the standard by which theology proceeds. For Barth, theology is not a "free science." It is bound to the Church because the Church is given the criteria against which its proclamation must be measured. Theology requires all the attention, concentration, and faithfulness to evidence that is required of any other science; but in addition it requires Christian faith.

The third, and for our purposes most interesting, reason why

theology is a science for Barth is that theology involves constant criticism and revision of the language of the Church about God. On one hand, the theological task can never be a matter simply of delivering a message from the past. It is never enough to know what the apostles and prophets have said. The task for theology is to determine what the Church must say today in light of our *knowledge* of the apostles and the prophets. Theology seeks to revise the language of the Church in every age, openly relating itself to every modern challenge. On the other hand, it must continually revise the language of the Church on the basis of what is known about its source, for it is here that the standard by which the Church must judge its language is revealed. Theology therefore must constantly encounter the Bible and all the results of biblical research (Barth 1936, 1, 1:xi, 1-10, 18).

III

For the theological task, as Barth saw it, the Bible is the anomaly par excellence. Its message stood in stark contrast against the theological language of his day. Far from supporting prevailing views of the immanence of God and of man as perfecting himself through history in a gradual realization of innate capacities for good, supported by increasing control over his environment, the Bible reveals man as a fallen creature, alienated from his neighbor, his environment, and himself, and speaks of a transcendent, unknowable God graciously revealed in Jesus Christ. These elements of Scripture could not be rendered harmless by academic rituals that might discharge their disruptive power. The theological project had to be revised.

But if the Bible presents conceptions of God and man anomalous to the theological wisdom of the intellectual world that surrounded Barth, it presents an anomaly of a different kind today. Over the past thirty years texts have been discovered, studied, translated, and edited that offer evidence that what has been accepted for most of Christian history as orthodox doctrine is really the product of events in which many traditions, with varying concepts of God, of the nature and significance of Jesus, and of salvation and the Church were finally surmounted by a form of Christianity that, because of its adaptation to historical conditions, attained sufficient political power and ideological credibility to suppress the others. Although Barth could speak in a straightforward manner about the revelation attested in sacred Scripture as the standard of Christian language concerning God, contemporary scholarship faces the question whether the scriptures that received the approval of Church authority in the third

and fourth centuries fairly reflect the revelation attested by the first communities of faith.

Barth, of course, responded to alternative views of the origin of the Christian faith: to Gottfried Arnold's *Unparteiische Kirchen und Ketzerhistorie* (Unbiased history of churches and heresies), to Rudolf Steck's speculations about the date and authorship of the epistles attributed to Paul, and to David Friedrich Strauss's famous *Life of Jesus*. Yet he could deal with all this as by-products of an eighteenth-century "critical study of history" that assumed that man could set himself as judge over past events, that written history is limited by what men of the age could accept as psychologically or physiologically probable (Barth 1959, 36). Barth's criticism of this theology was that by accepting a criterion for historical research from the secular world, it had capitulated to reduction of the study of the origin of Christian faith to a chapter in the history of religion (Barth 1960, 28ff.).

Recent studies of the origins of Christianity are of a different order because they are based not upon a particular philosophy of history but upon documentary evidence. When the first line of a page of the Nag Hammadi Codex (found in the Cairo Museum in 1955) was traced, it required no commitment to any philosophy to identify its words with fragments of a Greek Gospel of Thomas discovered in the 1880s: "These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down" (Thomas 1978, 118). Nor did it require any such commitment to observe that this gospel of secret words contained sayings familiar from the New Testament that were often expressed in startling settings, evoking a very different meaning, as well as sayings quite foreign to the teaching ascribed to Jesus in the Bible: "That which you have will save you if you bring it forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you will kill you if you do not have it within you" (Thomas 1978, 126). Moreover, because the New Testament refers to secret sayings spoken privately by Jesus to his disciples (e.g., Mark 4:11-12), it requires no commitment to any philosophy of history to ask whether this Gospel of Thomas might not be a collection of such sayings.

The fifty-two texts discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945, it is generally agreed, are Coptic translations, made perhaps 1,500 years ago, of still more ancient manuscripts. On the basis of the Coptic script and the papyrus in the bindings, the texts have been dated at 350-400 C.E. On the date of the texts from which these translations were made, scholars are not agreed, yet there is strong support for the view that some of the texts could not have been written after 150 C.E. The collection contains a number of books that seem to be Christian gospels, though they differ from those in the New Testa-

ment: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel to the Egyptians, the Gospel of Mary. Writing around 180 C.E., Irenaeus, the Christian bishop of Lyons, speaks of certain heretics whose literature has gained wide circulation and who claim to possess more gospels than there are. In this context, he refers to a Gospel of Truth, a title that corresponds, according to some, to one of the texts of the Nag Hammadi collection.

In her introduction to this literature, Elaine Pagels emphasizes the diversity of its contents. The texts range, she says, "from secret gospels, poems, and quasi-philosophic descriptions of the origin of the universe, to myths, magic, and instructions for mystical practice" (Pagels 1981, xvi). Yet she also says that they frequently refer to the Old Testament scriptures, the letters of Paul, the New Testament gospels, and to Jesus and his disciples. They differ from New Testament teaching and the teaching of orthodox Christianity in three significant ways: (Pagels 1981, xixff.).

1. Christian doctrine speaks of God as Father, the Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, as a being "wholly other," entirely separate from his creation, sharing his divinity with no one. Some of the texts from Nag Hammadi differ on this. Some speak of God as a dyad who embraces both masculine and feminine elements; some speak of a feminine counterpart to God the Father as the second person of the Trinity or as a feminine power in which creation was conceived; some even hold that in proclaiming himself sole God, the Father had spoken in ignorance blinded by his power. (Pagels 1981, 68ff.).

2. The New Testament and orthodox Christianity speak of Jesus as the agent of salvation from sin, wrought through his physical death and bodily resurrection. On the other hand, the Gospel of Mary, discovered at Nag Hammadi, interprets the resurrection appearances of Jesus as visions received by the disciples in dreams or ecstatic states, such as those attributed in this gospel to Mary Magdalene. In other texts, Jesus is not seen as a savior from sin but as a guide who points the way to spiritual enlightenment, and the Resurrection is seen as the moment in which the individual understands the depth of all things by coming to understand himself.

3. It is held by orthodox Christianity that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God, that he remains forever distinct from the rest of the human race. Yet the Gospel of Thomas relates that when Thomas recognized Jesus, the latter informed him that the two of them had become equal, that Jesus was no longer his master.

Most of these writings are identified, by Pagels and others, with the Gnostic heresy denounced by Irenaeus, Hyppolytus, Tertullian, and

other exponents of orthodoxy in the early centuries of the Christian church. Yet it is also evident, as Pagels makes clear, that the writers of these works did not consider themselves heretical. In many cases they are aware of what we know as orthodox Christianity, which they considered heresy. They saw reputed orthodox persons as spiritless and common, incapable of grasping the secret mysteries yet claiming exclusive access to the mystery of truth. Gnostic Christians saw the orthodox view of a literal Resurrection as a "faith of fools." They denounced as "waterless canals" those who named themselves bishops and deacons, as if they had received their authority from God—as leaders of an imitation Church.

The discoveries at Nag Hammadi challenge the view that diversity of doctrine, practice, and organization within the Christian religion has arisen despite an apostolic unity of belief, worship, and authority. What seems more likely, as Pagels explains, is that the Christian religion was even more diverse in its first two centuries than it is today. Present-day Christians, as different from each other as they are, agree at least upon the New Testament canon and the apostolic creed. By the third century, Christianity had become an institution governed by a hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons who considered themselves the guardians of the one true faith. Judged against this "true faith" of the majority, represented by the Church of Rome, divergent viewpoints were dealt with as heresy. Bishop Irenaeus, and those who followed him, insisted that there is but one Church and that outside this Church there is no salvation.

Put another way, Christianity had established a cohesive system of religious beliefs, supported by persuasive rites and symbols and by an imposing social order. Ideas that were incongruous with this religious system were acknowledged by the Church but were declared out of bounds, so to speak, to be deprived of their disruptive power. This acknowledgment is typified in the words of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, to the Gnostic Marcion after the latter had requested recognition: "I recognize . . . the first born of Satan!" (Pagels 1981, xxiii ff.; cf. Eusebius 1967, 167).

To understand why beliefs that came to be called orthodox achieved normative status, Pagels looks at the social and political implications of some dissenting opinions. The doctrine of a bodily resurrection of Christ, she argues, was crucial to the developing institutional organization of orthodox Christianity because it vested special authority in the apostles, to whom the risen Christ appeared. She notes that when the apostles chose a successor to Judas Iscariot, it was specified by Peter that the one to accede to his "office" must be a man who had accompanied the disciples during the time the Lord had

been among them, from his baptism by John until the day he ascended into heaven, and that in assuming this office he was to become, with them, "a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). This "doctrine" therefore tends to restrict the leadership of the Church to a class of persons whose qualifying experience is now forever closed: every future leader would have to derive his legitimacy from apostolic authority. Successors could never replicate this experience, but only believe, protect, and deliver the testimony of the original apostles to future generations (Pagels 1981, 11-12).

On the other hand, the view that the Resurrection of Jesus could be attested in dreams or ecstatic trance, or by divine enlightenment, contests the apostolic witness. "It suggests," says Pagels, "that whoever 'sees the Lord' through inner vision can claim that his or her authority equals or surpasses that of the twelve—and of their successors" (Pagels 1981, 16). In a similar way, the doctrine of God the Father underpins the patriarchal system of institutional authority, with its hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, all of whom are male. Conceptions of the sexless or androgenous nature of God would not support this arrangement (Pagels 1981, 57ff.). And the idea of Jesus as a spiritual guide, with whom Christians can become equal—rather than as the Redeemer from sin—tends not to support the Church as the sole mediator of a salvation that comes through Christ alone, who is "the way, the truth, and the life."

Then, according to Pagels, elements of the early Christian tradition that contributed to institutionalization became the orthodox teachings. Those that did not support this process, or actually opposed it, came to be known as heresy.

IV

In the theology of Barth, we said, some historical studies of the origin of Christianity that appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were dealt with as reflections of a current philosophy of history. For Barth, however, the question of historical research is not without importance. It arises in a more significant way in the question, "How can that which happened once [i.e., the Christ event] have happened for us when we who live today were not there and could not experience it ourselves?" (Barth 1936, 4, 1:287). Barth offers an answer that he admits is "profoundly ambiguous and unsettling." The Christ event can do this, he says, "only as we accept it from others, from the tradition of the Church and ultimately from the biblical witness" (Barth 1936, 4, 1:287). Yet this, he says, is not to be confused with the colossal stumbling block at the heart of the

Christian faith. When Paul says that the crucified Christ is to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, "he can hardly have been thinking of the paradox of the relationship between faith and history, or of the relationship between the historical singularity of His existence and cross and our contemporaneity with Him, or of the relationship between indirect and direct news concerning Him" (Barth 1936, 4, 1:289). Barth even suggests that the question is not "a genuine theological problem" but only "a technical difficulty," and that even when this difficulty is resolved, the profound enigma remains.

The real theological problem, according to Barth, is not our distance from the founding events, or the fact that these events are mediated to us only by the testimony of the apostles. The real difficulty is the *nature* of the Christ event itself. And as long as we are preoccupied with the technical difficulty, we avoid the real theological problem.

Barth is certainly correct. If the discovery at Nag Hammadi provides no more than a reminder of the inadequacy of any human witness as convincing evidence of the Resurrection, it would be no more than a technical point, for it offers no more evidence against the Resurrection than reason already has. The question posed by the Nag Hammadi discovery, however, is whether the teaching of a bodily resurrection, as well as other "orthodox" teachings received by Barth from the tradition of the Church and, ultimately, from the biblical witness, is the testimony of the earliest Christian communities or only the forms that proved congenial to the emerging, male-dominated social organization.

In the face of this challenge, a theology that pretends to be a science (in the terms that Barth has indicated) confronts the same alternatives that were available to theism in the seventeenth century. It can agree to the revision of its sources that a scientific undertaking demands, or it can defend the received tradition as the norm against which all theological language must be measured, thereby retaining its truths intact at the cost of its claim to intellectual legitimacy.

In this light, it is significant that, while feminists develop theological insights of a new and striking sort that relate in a powerful way to the contemporary situation, both the black theology of James Cone and the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez operate within the tradition received by the Church from the apostles. Among the sources of black theology, James Cone includes black experience, black history, and black culture, as well as revelation, Scripture, and tradition. Cone, who sees dimensions of all these sources neglected and suppressed by white racist theology, is critical of the official

Church for its support for "law and order," and he finds the "radical reformers" of the Protestant Reformation closer to the truth of Christianity than the "orthodox" reformers. Yet he acknowledges the New Testament as the product of this tradition. He sees the revelation of God in Scripture as a "black event"; yet the Bible, as received from the Christian tradition, remains, for him, "an indispensable witness" and "a guide for checking the contemporary interpretation of God's revelation, making certain that our interpretation is consistent with the biblical witness" (Cone 1970, 66).

In a similar way, the theology of Gutierrez has shed a new and relevant light upon the political dimension of the ministry of Jesus, and has related such classical theological notions as sin, salvation, eschatology, and sacrament to the historical process of liberation. He argues that it is those who try to "protect" salvation, who try to "save" it by lifting it from the midst of history, who "lose" it (Gutierrez 1973, 178). He believes that the Church "must cease considering itself as the exclusive place of salvation." It must orient itself toward a new and radical service to people. He thinks that the Church had done this spontaneously in the first centuries of its existence, and that it was only with its assimilation into the Roman Empire that this commitment was compromised. (Gutierrez 1973, x and 256). Yet in all of this he employs a received tradition of Scripture and a creed that had been solidified by the end of the second century.

The feminist theology of Rosemary Ruether is different. I do not argue that Ruether's theology was developed solely as a response to the challenge posed by the discoveries at Nag Hammadi. However, I argue that by its capacity to revise the language of theology in the light of evidence, to incorporate rather than exclude the anomaly, it satisfies the criteria for science acknowledged by Barth and endorsed by exponents of a contemporary philosophy of science. In this way it makes a claim to intellectual legitimacy that theology frequently finds is slipping through its fingers. Ruether acknowledges that "male monotheism" reinforces the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule. She holds that in this type of religion God is understood after the model of the patriarchal ruling class, which is related to this class of male rulers as "sons." Women, the wives of the males, are seen as a dependent class, relating to the men of the society as men relate to God. Women, then, are seen as relating to God in a secondary manner, through the male. She acknowledges that this patriarchal order underlies the structure of Old Testament law, and survives in the writers of the New Testament. For Paul, Christ is the head of every man, the head

of Christ is God, and the head of every woman is her husband (1 Cor 11:3ff.) (Ruether 1983, 53).

From archaeology, Ruether infers that Jewish male monotheism did not completely replace the female (or paired) images of the divine in the ancient Near East. One form of the Canaanite goddess, she notes, continued to be worshiped, alongside Yahweh in Israel's first temple for two-thirds of its existence (Ruether, 1983, 56). She also notes that feminine images of the divine were employed in an early stage of Christian thought. In Philo the divine Logos, a masculine image, replaces the earlier Sophia, a divine feminine image, as the source of creation, the revealer of the mind of God, who reconciles humanity to himself. In the New Testament this Logos is identified with Jesus as Son of God, the image of the Father. But alongside this Son of God, which helps to reinstate patriarchal monotheism, feminine images of God continue to appear, mostly in texts denounced as heretical by early exponents of "orthodox" Christianity. One such text (discovered at Nag Hammadi), which refers to the Spirit of God as feminine, holds that it was impossible for the Holy Spirit to have impregnated the womb of Mary, because a female cannot impregnate another female. In other such texts, the Triune God is seen as Father, Mother, and Son. Recognizing the relation of male monotheism to patriarchal rule, Ruether does not endorse the judgment of early Christian orthodoxy concerning these images of God. She states, "We cannot conclude that female imagery for the Spirit is a later 'deviation' of heretical Christianity. Rather, we should see an earlier Christianity, which used such female imagery, gradually being marginalized by a victorious Greco-Roman Christianity that repressed it" (Ruether 1983, 59).

In taking this position, Ruether incorporates material that goes beyond the tradition received from the apostles, material traditionally regarded as beyond the pale of proper theological discourse, but material now available, because of Nag Hammadi research, to a more considered evaluation. Ruether suggests that even before the fourth century, when Christianity came to be identified with the Roman Empire, forms of human domination were already operating in the selection of beliefs and texts that would eventually represent and define "the Christian faith." To understand these forms of domination, material once considered heretical or out of bounds must be re-examined. Such material should be considered not simply as specimens of heretical thinking, discharged of their power to disturb, but as resources for disturbing the intellectual status quo and for revising God-talk in the light of the anomalous and exceptional (Ruether 1983, 22ff.).

V

If Ruether's reconception of theology in light of the anomalous qualifies as science, has Ruether compromised or abandoned what Barth called the "theological standard of truth"? Has Ruether transformed theology into a sociology of religion as others transformed it into a history of religion? To address these questions, it is useful to recall that, for Barth, the standard of truth is not Scripture or even orthodox belief; it is the *revelation* to which Scripture is the witness. The question, then, is whether Ruether's theology has compromised this standard.

At the heart of biblical religion, according to Ruether, is "a motif of protest against the status quo of ruling-class privilege and the deprivation of the poor." In the Bible, God is not simply the ruler; he is seen by the prophets as the critic of human domination, "a champion of the social victims." In radical prophetic consciousness, salvation is envisioned as deliverance from a system of social oppression. Ruether sees this prophetic consciousness as renewed in the New Testament and applied to social groups overlooked in Old Testament prophesy. "Class, ethnicity, and gender are now specifically singled out as the divisions overcome by redemption in Christ" (Ruether 1983, 62-63.).

Although the image of God the Father contributed to the legitimization of male authority in the institutionalization of the early Church, the early Jesus movement employed the concept of God as *Abba* to liberate the community from human dominance-dependence relations arising from kinship ties or master-slave arrangements. To follow Jesus was to put aside loyalty to father, mother, sisters, and brothers, replacing the patriarchal family with a new community of brothers and sisters, which is a community of equals. "Because God is our parent, we are liberated from dependence on patriarchal authority" (Ruether 1983, 65). It is after this that God as Father and King is again assimilated into the cultural relationship and is again used to sacralize the authority of human male leadership. The revelation attested in Scripture, then, must be distinguished from the pattern of patriarchal institutionalization that comes to dominate the official Church, and even to determine what constitutes orthodox belief.

Research into the roots of ancient Jewish messianism, according to Ruether, reveals that the teaching of Jesus concerning the Kingdom of Heaven is a radicalizing of an ethnic hope for a coming reign of God. In the teaching of Jesus, this kingdom (to come) is neither nationalistic nor otherworldly. "It is a time when structures of

domination and subjugation have been overcome, when the basic human needs are met (daily bread), when all dwell in harmony with God and each other (not led into temptation but delivered from evil)" (Ruether 1983, 120). This time will occur, moreover, as the divine response to human repentance, especially the repentance of the people of Israel for systems of fossilized religious righteousness and class oppression that have distorted their vision of God's mercy and promise. In this context Jesus recasts the symbol of his identity as divine prophet, and therefore as king, into the image of servant. He is not the "good slave" of social relations but the servant of God, free from human overlords but capable of giving himself to the liberation of others, rather than ruling over them (Ruether 1983, 121).

Transformation of the teaching of Jesus into the Christology of orthodox Christianity (i.e., teaching about Jesus as Savior) took place, according to Ruether, over an extended time, beginning with the shock of the Crucifixion. In the course of this transformation Ruether sees three phases in which the relation between the teaching of Jesus, much of the content of the Nag Hammadi library, and its repudiation by orthodox leadership can be understood. In the first phase, the Resurrection experiences enabled the disciples to dispel the notion that the Crucifixion of Jesus was the final word. With this, his death could be seen as that of a suffering servant atoning for the sins of Israel. It also allowed for his continuing to be alive, in the midst of the early Christian community, in the prophetic Spirit that was manifested in ecstatic utterances and in the gifts of healing and forgiveness. This community expected an immanent intervention of God in history, in which evil principalities and powers would be overthrown, and the community would meet the special emissary of God, now identified with Jesus as the Christ (Messiah), who would establish a new heaven and earth (Ruether 1983, 121ff.).

The second phase of this development begins with conflict between the original, charismatic order of Christian leadership and a developing, institutional order of bishops. The latter feel the need to end the tradition of speaking in the name of Jesus by means of the prophetic Spirit. The sayings and teachings of Jesus are gathered into biographical dramas that become the definitive texts of the Lord. Revelation is relegated to the past, where it is associated with a historical Christ. The power of the Spirit is institutionalized in the authority of bishops, who have received the deposit of faith from the apostles and have transmitted it unaltered.

The third and decisive phase begins with the establishment of the Christian church as the religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity is installed in political power over the world and is identified with the

thousand-year reign of Christ. It reintegrates the Messiah symbol with a kingship ideology, supported by male monotheism, and Christology becomes the "apex of a system of control" as the divine Logos is identified with the foundation of the social system. "Just as the Logos of God governs the cosmos, so the Christian Roman Empire, together with the Christian Church, governs the political universe; masters govern slaves and men govern women" (Ruether 1983, 125). This Christology supports the concepts of sin, salvation, and community that are developed in the theologies that follow, and the diminutive status of women continues in the theological efforts of such figures as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth (Ruether 1983, 93ff.)

The problem with this purported development is not that it is a Christology, a teaching about Jesus as Savior, rather than the teachings of Jesus himself; the problem is that it is a patriarchal Christology determined by a system of privilege and control. The purpose of feminist theology is to criticize and revise this Christology, as well as the anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology that develop from the same kind of thinking. It seeks to do this in the contemporary struggle of women for full humanity, and it does so in the light of the revelatory experience attested in sacred Scripture. At the same time, it "makes the sociology of theological knowledge visible, no longer hidden behind mystifications of objectified and universal authority" (Ruether 1983, 13). It takes into account the witness of all available resources and not just that of the Bible. In these respects, Ruether's feminist theology is singularly qualified to speak to our age in a way that compromises neither its claim to scientific authenticity nor its claim to the theological standard of truth.

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