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Modernizing the Rule

The Quest for the Essence of Christianity

ANDREW WALLS (1928–2021), the late missiologist and historian of Christianity, proposed a profound thought experiment in 1982. He imagined an interplanetary anthropologist and scholar of comparative religions who visited Earth at different moments to study Christianity: Jerusalem in 37 CE, Nicaea in 325, Ireland in the 600s, London in the 1840s, and Lagos in 1980. At each point in Earth history, this extraterrestrial scholar would observe the vast differences in religious belief and practice from other moments, including variations in standard of living, liturgical forms, relations with those outside their community, doctrinal beliefs, and the like.

What, Walls then concluded, unites these disparate modes of Christianity? How does our visitor from space make sense of these observations? Is the use of the label "Christian" deceptive and equivocal, being used in ways that are incommensurable with each other? Does shared religion ultimately depend on shared culture? Or is there a connection between these communities, a common essence or religious core that remains in some sense normative, even if the historical expressions of this core identity change dramatically from era to era?[1]

Walls uses his thought experiment as the basis for his theory of translation – translation referring not merely to the change from one language to another but to the process by which the gospel migrates from one cultural location to another. The move from London to Lagos in the present day requires cultural translation but so does the move from seventh-century Ireland to twenty-first-century Ireland. Both geography and chronology are significant in the question of cultural difference. Walls uses the term "gospel" to refer to the normative, prescriptive

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element in Christianity, while the term "culture" refers to the descriptive context in which Christian norms take root and flourish. His argument for translation aims to avoid reducing the prescriptive gospel to the descriptive context while also avoiding any abstract gospel free from context altogether. To explain this translation process, Walls proposes two principles for understanding the relation between gospel and culture: the "indigenizing" principle and the "pilgrim" principle. The former refers to the way Christian faith always inhabits a particular cultural form, while the latter refers to the way that Christian faith never leaves that form unchanged and always presses toward new forms – and finally to the eschatological horizon of God's kingdom.

Though more recent intercultural scholars have nuanced or moved beyond Walls's categories, his thought experiment remains theologically stimulating. What is the best way to theorize the relation between Christianity and culture in the wake of the increasingly rapid proliferation of diverse Christian communities around the world over the past century? Can we even speak of the "gospel" as a self-identical norm? What is "culture" now that anthropologists and cultural theorists have replaced old static notions of culture with models that recognize its plasticity and complexity? These are the kinds of questions raised by Walls's work, and they continue to be significant – as the rest of this book aims to explore in more detail.

But there is one important aspect of his hypothetical thought experiment that Walls does not point out – namely, the fact that we are able to consider his inquiry meaningful at all. Walls takes it for granted that the diversity of Christian communities throughout history poses a problem, a problem that his readers will themselves recognize and affirm. But that in itself presupposes a unique historical context, one in which the historical continuity of Christianity is no longer assumed as a given. Jesus followers in Jerusalem in 37 CE would, of course, not have perceived this issue at all, since there was no Christianity at this time; the issue then was whether gentiles could be included in the Jewish community. The differences between fourth-century Nicaea and seventh-century Ireland were rendered insignificant, if they were acknowledged at all, because they were held together by the ecclesiastical empire of Christendom, with its hierarchical structure of apostolic succession, the

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spread of authorized dioceses, and the recognition of priestly orthodoxy by the bishops.

Everything changes, however, when we move from Ireland in the 600s to London in the 1840s, and not merely in terms of the obvious differences of worship and doctrine. Not only do "religions after 1800 differ substantially from their pre-1800 forms," but the nature of their prescriptive norms changes as well.[2] Prior to the modern period, the norm of orthodoxy was defined over against heterodoxy, but there was no heterodox movement capable of challenging the institutional dominance of orthodoxy. The authority of orthodoxy was unquestioned. For this reason, the tension in the premodern world was between strict orthodoxy and lenient orthodoxy. Staf Hellemans calls this "orthodoxy from above," since it was "facilitated by the power of organisational elites in directing their organisational affairs," as seen paradigmatically in the Council of Nicaea.[3] It was only in the modern period, especially starting in the nineteenth century, that religious liberalism arose as a legitimate alternative, one that produced the corresponding reactionary norm of conservatism. The two binaries – orthodoxy and leniency, conservatism and liberalism – "became connected in modernity," as "the opposition between liberalism and conservatism was superimposed upon the older opposition between leniency and orthodoxy."[4] This superimposition had profound implications for both orthodoxy and liberalism. For one thing, a distinction between levels of doctrinal rigidity (orthodoxy vs. leniency) became a conflict between parties (conservatives vs. liberals). The opposition between orthodoxy and liberalism "acted as a binary conceptual scheme that permitted the convenient reduction of multiple projects to two warring sides," obscuring the fact that "there were always more than two projects."[5] This reduction also distorted the two parties. Orthodoxy, now understood predominantly as theological conservatism, hardened into a strict adherence to the authoritative tradition, while liberalism, now understood predominantly as lenient adaptation, became associated with the uncritical accommodation of modernity. As Hellemans points out, this was a misrepresentation of both positions. Orthodoxy had in fact vastly changed in modernity; it was now a program defined by its stern opposition to liberalism, as opposed to the earlier opposition to heterodoxy. Liberalism, for its part, was more than just leniency; it "had a

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programmatic base of its own: to unearth the essence of Christianity from the accretion of traditions."[6] As a strategy for defining religious identity, modern orthodoxy was more of a reaction to this liberal program than any straightforward continuation of the past.

Orthodoxy and liberalism in the modern period are also both chiefly "from below," defined not by the dictates of ecclesiastical elites but rather by lay individuals, parachurch organizations, and popular movements. Insofar as orthodoxy from above entailed forced conformity, as it did in the ancient and medieval worlds, virtually all forms of Christianity in modernity are from below. The most consequential difference between premodern and modern societies, the one described at length by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, is not outwardly apparent, at least not without sustained experience in the modern world. It is the inner recognition that one is *choosing* to be Christian and that one could choose otherwise – to believe a different version of Christianity, a different religion entirely, or no religion at all. Not only can people choose otherwise but many of them do so on a regular basis. These constant, everyday choices create a social context in which faith, whether orthodox, liberal, or otherwise, is constructed and held together not by any authority – to the chagrin of many ecclesiastical leaders – but by the fragile decision of people to continue to participate in a particular form of religious practice. And increasingly people are choosing to abandon their religious communities, sometimes leading them to change their affiliation or even to disaffiliate from religion altogether. In other words, what makes Christianity in nineteenth-century London or twenty-first-century Los Angeles different from the previous versions identified by Walls are not necessarily the particular details of this or that worshiping community but the recognition of the multiplicity, contingency, and fluidity of all these communities.

The result of this ever-present awareness of Christianity's internal differences is that Christians in the modern, secular world of the Euro-American West are constantly asking themselves: What makes someone Christian? What binds these disparate groups together – if anything? Am I in communion with those people over there who also claim to be Christian? Do these polls truly represent me? Is there a "mere Christianity" underneath the centuries of doctrinal accretion and the

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decades of culture wars? Missiologists like Walls are often the ones most frequently posing these questions because they are intimately aware of the differences that exist in world Christianity today. But in our ultra-connected world, where anyone can digitally cross great distances in a matter of seconds, these questions have proliferated exponentially. And the questions are not a matter of merely abstract curiosity. They have deep existential significance, precisely because the boundaries of religious identity are no longer clearly defined.

The questions may have multiplied in recent years, but the underlying issue itself is an old one. For nearly a half-millennium, Christians in the West have been wondering what really defines Christianity. The problem was all too apparent. The Protestant Reformation gave rise to warring religious factions, with the so-called magisterial Protestants – that is, the Lutheran and Reformed churches – fighting between themselves over issues like the sacraments but also teaming up against the Roman Catholics, on the one side, and the Anabaptists and other Radical Reformers, on the other. As these divisions hardened into what we call denominations, splitting along national lines, it was hard to avoid the conclusion that one's religious identity was simply another way of describing one's cultural and ethnic identity, with Italian Catholics, Swedish Lutherans, Swiss Reformed, and British Anglicans. Moreover, the very nature of true, salvific faith changed in this period. "Following the Reformation," according to Peter Harrison, "the fragmentation of Christendom led to a change from an institutionally based understanding of exclusive salvation to a propositionally based understanding. Formerly it had been 'no salvation outside the Church.' Now, it had become 'no salvation without the profession of the "true religion."'"[7] Not only was orthodoxy questionable, but what counted as orthodoxy had changed – as well as how orthodoxy was determined and who had the authority to determine it. The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment philosophical revolution worked in tandem to disrupt matters further. While the Reformation wrested the question of Christianity's identity out of the hands of the Roman magisterium, these modern intellectual upheavals called into question all the sources and norms of Christian faith. If the Bible was not reliable in its description of the celestial heavens, could it be relied upon in its account of

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redemption in Christ? If knowledge required sensory experience, and was the result of our own minds interpreting that experience, then could we have any knowledge at all about God? And if we could, why should we trust the ecclesial authorities to provide us this knowledge? The critical floodgates had been opened. One could no longer assume the truth of Christianity. One now had to demonstrate that Christianity possessed a gospel that could survive these critical inquiries – an essence or core identity that could withstand the withering scrutiny of its biblical texts and dogmatic traditions. And so began the task of modern prescriptivism.

Already in his 1612 essay "Of Unity in Religion," Francis Bacon, the pioneer of the scientific method, distinguished between "the points fundamental and of substance in religion . . . from points not merely of faith, but of opinion, order, or good intention."[8] As the waves of historical, scientific, and philosophical critique crashed against the shores of the church, the revetments of venerable tradition and learned dogmatics often did not hold, forcing new efforts at defining "the points fundamental." The outcome of this was the long quest for the "essence of Christianity," as it was called at the time – a quest that continues to this day.

This is the context in which Walls poses the idea of his hypothetical interplanetary scholar – a context marked by an ever-increasing pluralism, the persistent awareness of Christianity's tenuous position in the modern world, the search for a Christian identity that makes sense of the latest challenges to faith, and the manifest reality that there are virtually as many Christianities as there are Christians. For the descriptivists, this is how it has always been, insofar as history is nothing other than the messy, complex story of humans acting in diverse and contradictory ways; modern developments make for an interesting, sometimes tragic, chronicle but otherwise raise no concerns. For the prescriptivists and those trying to make sense of Christian faith today, however, all of this poses the dilemma: what unites Christianity, in all its complexity, across time and space? Is there a Christian essence? If so, who gets to define it and how? To the first two questions, Walls argues that the instances he picked out are held together in two ways: (1) historically, by means of a chain of

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cause and effect and (2) theologically and liturgically, by virtue of their shared conviction "that the person of Jesus called the Christ has ultimate significance," the use of the same sacred texts, and the special use of bread, wine, and water. He also notes "the continuity of consciousness," the sense each group has that they belong to a larger community that encompasses other communities throughout history, even ancient Israel. Moreover, Walls refers to all this as "an essential continuity in Christianity."[9] Regardless of what we make of Walls's answers – which are, by design, about as generic and anodyne as possible – the point remains that these are the underlying questions animating, even if only implicitly, the different quests for the Christian essence, both the modern liberal quest and the antimodern conservative reaction to it.

I refer to this long history as the quest for the essence of Christianity mostly because that is the language that was in vogue for most of this period, stretching roughly from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth. This is the high period of liberal Christianity, which is hardly monolithic but broadly refers to those theologians, church leaders, and institutions that embraced the need to accommodate the new developments that came with modernity. Not all liberal theologians embraced the same developments of the modern age, so accommodating this period could look quite different from one person to another and from one period or region to another. Nevertheless, some common features remain, including the readiness to rethink the Bible and Christian doctrine in light of new scientific discoveries and the willingness to make use of new philosophical concepts as a way to adapt Christianity to the cultural moment. Given the radical upheavals that came with this period, there was still a felt need to identify what made a new theology recognizably "Christian." And that is what the idea of the Christian essence provided.

The language of "essence" is somewhat dated now and carries pejorative connotations for many who view it as overly static and disconnected from history, as if an essence is separate from and untouched by its concrete appearance. But other metaphors have the same or at least a similar problem: content and form, substance and accident, kernel and husk, core and exterior, center and periphery, norm and adiaphora, principle and application. There is no perfect language for whatever is

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the defining element or characteristic of something as historically complex as Christianity. Bishop and theologian Stephen Sykes titled his 1984 book on the subject, *The Identity of Christianity*, which was ahead of its time in its choice of terminology.[10] Seven years before his book appeared, the Combahee River Collective coined the term "identity politics," which helped unleash the widespread use of identity language that began in the late 1980s. Today we might speak of one's inner identity in contrast to their outward appearance – that is to say, how they "pass" or "present" in society, which does not move us past our linguistic dilemma. The language of identity is more common today than essence, but it has the same potential for critique and misunderstanding.

Whether we use essence or identity, or one of the other available options – and I will use them interchangeably in this book – does not matter here. For whatever reason, the word "essence" (*Wesen* in German) won the day and became the technical term for over two centuries, and it serves our purposes now just as well as it did then, with the same benefits and drawbacks. We regularly distinguish between essential and inessential aspects of things; and even if we no longer speak regularly about the "essence of Christianity," people are asking on a daily basis what constitutes the core identity of Christian faith. Church historian Rolf Schäfer observes that "the history of the concept 'essence of Christianity' grows out of the history of the concept 'Christianity,' for wherever one defines Christianity, there one defines its essence."[11] Faced with the challenges of religious division and disaffiliation, the existential problem of defining the essence of Christianity is more real to us now than it ever has been.

The increasingly vexed questions over Christian identity form the backdrop for the recent turn to the rule of faith among postliberal and conservative theologians and pastors. While the interest in the *regula fidei* is an effort to do an end run around the modern quest for the essence, effectively ignoring or denying that modernity happened, the reality is that the retrievals of the rule of faith today are dependent on this quest for the essence of faith whether they want to be or not – and for this reason they have to be understood as belonging to the quest, albeit antagonistically. "Anti-liberalism and anti-modernism," according to Hellemans, "are a way of thinking with regard to modernity . . . and that is a genuinely modern undertaking."[12] Those who appeal to the rule of

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faith do so in a context in which such appeals are shaped by the transformations of society, including religion, that have occurred over the past several centuries. No one is untouched by these changes, even if the doctrines and liturgies remain identical. Someone who participates in the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom today may be saying words that go back to the fifth century, but those words are received in a fundamentally different way by someone living in the twenty-first century. What is true for Greek Orthodoxy is even more true for Reformed Protestantism, which has undergone profound rifts and transformations over the centuries. As Evan Kuehn observes, few if any theologians today do their work "under any actual constraint of ecclesiastical censure, not even when they posture as if they were." For this reason, as loathe as some may be to admit it, "we are all liberal theologians now, and it has been quite a while since we were not all liberals."[13] While conservative Christians, according to Samuel Loncar, "have long argued that Liberalism is simply a bad compromise with the modern world," evangelicals and other antimodern traditionalists "suffer from the fantasy that modernity is optional, that they are not already, in every relevant sense, modern." Christian traditionalists of all stripes "have not yet recognized that the challenge is not *whether* to be modern but *how*."[14] If there is a distinction to be made, it is not between conservative and liberal Christians but between modern and antimodern liberals – or, to borrow from Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, between lowercase "protestants" and "catholics," respectively, the former referring to those (Protestant, Catholic, or otherwise) who accommodate modernity and the latter referring to those who resist it.[15]

The chapters that follow will look at the antimodern catholics. But before we can assess the recent antimodern attempts to answer the question of Christian identity by way of the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), it is first necessary to understand the modern quest for the essence of Christianity. In the rest of this chapter, I trace this quest from the Reformation through its modern liberal representatives, including Deists, mystics, historicists, existentialists, and liberationists. At this stage in our presentation, the point is not to argue for any particular account of the essence but to provide this history as the explanatory milieu for those who sought to counter the liberal quest with appeals to church

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tradition and ecclesial culture, whom I will discuss in the following chapters. This chapter will largely focus on the European tradition of liberal Christianity, both for the sake of brevity and because that is where the terms of the debate were set, before migrating to other parts of the world. At the end of this chapter, I will synthesize this history by outlining the different strategies for defining Christian identity that appear in the course of the modern quest.

THE REFORMATION ORIGINS OF THE QUEST

The history of the *quest* for the essence is different from the history of the essence itself. Every creed, every theological disputation, is either a direct or indirect exposition of what the faithful at a particular time and place considered the Christian essence – though the language of "essence" as we use it today is anachronistically applied to them. With respect to the ancients, we might more accurately call it the "substance" of the faith. Unlike the recent quest for the essential rule of faith that I am investigating in this book, however, there was no *ancient* quest for the rule of faith, because questing as such is a modern phenomenon. The ancient and medieval efforts at clarifying the Christian essence were not instances of a quest for the essence, because no quest was seen as critically necessary. Specific theologians had opinions about what defined a true Christian, but there was no existential need to figure this out because the authority of church tradition was not in doubt. Without a crisis of authority there can be no quest. By analogy, there were many theologians who made claims about the Jesus of history over the centuries, but there was no quest for the historical Jesus until the rise of historical consciousness and criticism of creedal Christology made such a quest necessary. To find the origins of the quest for the essence, we thus need to look to the origins of the modern crisis of authority, and for that we must turn to the Protestant Reformation.

It is a truism of recent scholarship on the history of Protestantism that the Reformation was more of a late medieval occurrence than an early modern one, and there is substantial truth to this observation. As Carl Ullmann (1796–1865) pointed out in his classic 1841 study of *Reformers before the Reformation*, there were numerous late medieval forerunners of

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the Reformation – Bernard of Clairvaux, the Brethren of the Common Life, John Wycliff, Jan Hus, Johannes von Goch, and Johann von Wesel, among others – and one needed the right social conditions to make a genuine Reformation possible.[16] Protestantism is the inheritor of these prior efforts at theological and ecclesiastical reform, as well as the beneficiary of serendipitous conditions, including the invention of the printing press and a favorable political environment. More recent research on the origins of Protestantism has only deepened this understanding of its medieval roots, countering the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German theologians who wanted to marshal Luther in favor of their national cause.[17]

We even find talk of an "essence" prior to Luther, as the work of Hans Wagenhammer has demonstrated.[18] Medieval theologians spoke about the *substantia fidei*, the substance of faith, which includes those matters that are necessary for one to believe in order to have saving faith. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Commentary on Lombard's Sentences*, says that the *substantia fidei* includes the belief that God is one and triune, among other things.[19] The late medieval German mystics, like Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, generally did not talk about essences as static, metaphysical nouns. Instead, they talked about the life of ascetic virtue by which a person *becomes essential*. The "essential Christian" is the one whose life has been perfected through ascetic discipline so that they more fully experience participation in and union with the divine. The Bohemian Brethren and the Brethren of the Common Life, much like later Protestant pietism, distinguished between "the essential" and "the useful" aspects of the Christian life: the former referred to the virtues of faith, hope, and love, while the latter concerned details of doctrine and polity.[20]

While there were many reformist movements before the Reformation, it was Luther (1483–1546) who precipitated the modern quest for the essence. He was not the first to posit a new essence – nor was his account of the essence really new in the first place – but he was the first to do so in conjunction with a successful crisis of ecclesial authority. We must see both aspects, the negative and positive, together. Luther's critique of Rome's practice of indulgences was the critical counterpart to his constructive proposals for the essence of Christianity. In his 1518 *Heidelberg*

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Disputation he articulated this essence as a "theology of the cross" (*theologia crucis*), which functioned for Luther as a hermeneutical norm by which to interpret the totality of God's revelation. He stated in thesis twenty, for instance, that a theologian must "understand the visible and posterior things of God seen through suffering and the cross."[21] The cross – which refers metonymically to a wider set of theological concepts, including justification, divine hiddenness, and the relation between law and gospel – serves as the core or principle of the early Luther's theology, providing a critical filter by which to evaluate scripture and doctrine and posing a direct challenge to the tradition and authority of Rome.

In other writings, Luther used the doctrine of justification to accomplish the same purpose. His 1518 sermon on two kinds of righteousness introduced the concept of "alien righteousness" or "alien justice" (*iusticia aliena*), which belongs to Christ alone and is "infused from outside of ourselves" and "by which he justifies through faith."[22] The alienness of grace provides not only a constructive norm for theology but also a critique of Rome's theology, which presumes that the church hierarchy possesses the authoritative deposit of faith (*depositum fidei*) and is authorized to mediate and dispense God's grace to those who partake of the sacraments. To declare that grace is alien is to acknowledge that no church institution or tradition can claim to possess it; if grace belongs to Christ alone then it is solely the work of God and is available equally to everyone for whom Christ is present by faith. By accepting this new doctrine of grace, this new Christian essence, one thereby accepts a new foundation for the church itself. For this reason Luther can say later that "if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if it falls, the church falls."[23] The distinction between human works and divine grace is so central to his thought that in his 1525 treatise *On the Bound Will*, Luther says that the distinction "between the power of God and our power, between the work of God and our work," constitutes the "total sum of Christianity."[24]

The question about the content of the Christian essence is inseparable from the question about its source and our access to that source. For this reason, Luther's account of the essence of Christianity goes hand in hand with his interest in the essential canon and the essential

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hermeneutic of scripture. Luther was influenced by the work of the humanists over the previous century, who had criticized the official texts and translations of scripture and challenged church leaders to focus more on the study of the Bible's original languages than on the fine points of scholastic theological debate. His own translation of the New Testament into German used the 1519 second edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament. In addition to textual and philological study, Luther applied his account of the "sum of Christianity" to the biblical texts. His 1522 preface to the letter of James famously criticized its inclusion within the canon on the grounds that "whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic." His guiding criterion for any text of the canon is not whether the church authorities have decided it but "whether it drives home Christ" (*ob sie Christum treiben*) – that is to say, whether it pushes, promotes, and emphasizes Christ.[25]

Luther further challenged Rome's authority when, in 1520, he introduced the principle that "scripture interprets itself" (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), rejecting the magisterium's exclusive right to interpret scripture and complementing the subversive theological concepts of cross and justification.[26] Luther combined this with a critique of the medieval fourfold exegetical method (known as the *Quadriga*) that emphasized spiritual and allegorical interpretation as the highest understanding of the biblical text. Luther elevated the literal (or historical) reading of the text, arguing that the spiritual interpretive methods are of no value "unless the same thing is expressed elsewhere in the historical sense."[27] Not only was this a criticism of traditional interpretive methods, but it also made the meaning of scripture accessible to common people who did not have the elite, esoteric knowledge of theological symbolism necessary to engage in spiritual interpretation, thus serving as the exegetical counterpart to his work on an accessible German text of the Bible. By identifying a publicly available, vernacular scripture as the source of the essence, and scripture itself as the hermeneutic for understanding this source, Luther identified a distinctively Protestant essence (or sum) of Christianity, one that subverts the traditional authority structure and democratizes our access to the knowledge and grace of God.

While he could never have anticipated what would happen in the centuries to follow, Luther's efforts made it possible to distinguish

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between the descriptive and prescriptive in a way that was inconceivable in the era of medieval Christendom, when the "true church" was simply identical with the visible church – that is to say, if you were a citizen of a Christian nation and participated in the customs of baptism and Mass, you were as much a Christian as anyone else. The Reformation exploded this identification. The true church was now essentially invisible, defined by an invisible, eternal act of election and an invisible, individual faith. Moreover, the source for defining the true church – the canonical scriptures – were available to anyone who could read, thanks to translation and the printing press. Anyone in principle could offer their own take on what makes someone a "true Christian." Prescriptivism became the common right of all. It was disruptive enough when the disagreements were merely over the understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. But when the authority of the Bible and the reliability of our knowledge of God came under question, new efforts to define what makes someone Christian became necessary.

THE LIBERAL QUEST

For all of Luther's democratizing influence, the magisterial Protestant Reformation still took place within a late medieval context in which the authority of the church over society was presumed to be a given. Even appeals to nature and general revelation presupposed a social context in which everyone was already "Christian" by default. All of that changed as the scientific insights of Copernicus, Galileo, and Bacon transformed the intellectual landscape, resulting in the overthrow of the old "confessional regime."[28] Christians had always recognized that human reason could access truth apart from divine revelation on the basis that the same God who spoke the word of revelation also created the world and our rational capacities. All truth was God's truth, and thus the insights gained by reason apart from faith could not but cohere with the truths of revelation. But the scientific revolution upended that consensus. Telescopic observations that anyone could see with their own eyes disproved the geocentric Ptolemaic cosmos that ecclesiastical leaders understood as divine truth – a truth supposedly confirmed not only by common sense but also by the pages of holy writ. It was one thing for an Augustinian

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monk like Luther to claim that he had the correct interpretation of the apostle Paul's letters. It was quite another thing for anyone with the right scientific instruments to show that the old theories about the universe were wrong; indeed, even recognizing them as theories was itself scandalous. Entire metaphysical edifices had been constructed around these ideas, and once their certainty was no longer secure, the only question was: What else might crumble?

The answer was: quite a lot. Not everything crumbled right away, and different aspects of the classical world crumbled for different people. Moreover, people found widely divergent strategies for addressing these new developments. The most common and conservative approach was already on display in the Reformation. Calvin championed the idea of "accommodation" as a means of explaining the alien and often unsettling language of the Bible. If, in the Bible, God was accommodating the divine truth to the limitations of the human recipients of revelation, then one could explain geocentric statements, for example, as an act of accommodation to the cosmological views of ancient Israel. Some paired accommodation with an account of progressive revelation, whereby God gradually revealed new truths (or at least new clarifications of old truths) in line with humanity's progress in knowledge, especially with respect to the natural world. As attractive as this was for many, this approach came with significant drawbacks. For one thing, it assumed an anthropomorphic deity who willfully acts in discrete ways, choosing to reveal this or that according to specific human recipients. Such a concept of god might work at a popular level for those who imagine the divine as a kind of human figure, but theologically it was a nonstarter. Such a god could not be transcendent in the way the tradition had understood the one Jesus named as Father. Such a god would instead be more like the demigods of Greek lore, residing in their Olympian abode and deigning every so often to walk among mortals. The other problem was that it assumed a timeless, nonhistorical concept of revelation; it treated revelation as existing "out there" in some abstract, eternal form, which the deity then tailored for a specific historical moment. It failed to recognize that all truths are historical, enmeshed in the contingencies of culture.

The alternative to accommodation was the strategy of mediation, a term that refers to a two-stage process: first, the selection of a material

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principle or essence that summarizes the core of Christian faith; second, the mediation of all Christian doctrine in accordance with this principle. The process of mediation recognizes that all Christian theology is historical and open to new interpretations and accommodations. In place of a supposedly consensual, universal orthodoxy, mediation discards old doctrines and concepts if they no longer serve the purpose of expressing the fundamental essence of Christianity within the current moment. The theologian thus has the responsibility of identifying the principle or essence that best maintains continuity with the truth of Christianity while allowing for a more credible articulation of this truth. The choice of the essence is, of course, a highly contested one, and the arguments in theology within this context become arguments over the essence, as well as over related foundational starting points. Hence the reason for the heavy emphasis on prolegomena (introductory first principles) in modern theology. For the sake of simplicity, I will describe all theologies that engage in mediation as versions of "liberal theology," meaning any theology that embraces the challenges posed by modernity, such as the scientific revolution, the new epistemologies of philosophers like Immanuel Kant, the rise of historical consciousness and historical criticism in the nineteenth century, and the new sociopolitical and economic realities of mercantilism, imperialism, colonialism, and the Industrial Revolution. Liberal theology does not necessarily respond to all of these changes; it simply engages in the task of mediation in a way that constructs a theology more credible to this new world. Framed this way, all of the theologians surveyed in the rest of this chapter are liberal theologians, and the subsequent quests described below are not alternatives to the liberal quest but rather variations and developments of it.

In the wake of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, many were disgusted with the way Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Christians had allowed their theological differences to spill over into such bloody political conflict. Whether they had rightly interpreted the reasons for the wars or not, many concluded that the appeal to special revelation – the notion that God has specially disclosed hidden mysteries to select people, accessible by faith alone – was at the root of the conflicts. Each community believed it had exclusive access to God's truth, and that the others were heretical, perhaps even the agents of the devil. Such exclusivity was

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quickly falling out of fashion. The scientific revolution had already proven that knowledge about the natural world was available to anyone who made the empirical observations. Many drew the corresponding conclusion that general experience and observation of the natural world could grant people *religious* knowledge as well. These theologians, known as Deists, believed that reason, rather than revelation, was the source of true knowledge about God and the world.

Whether or not John Locke (1632–1704) belongs to the camp of the Deists – he understood revelation and reason to be complementary sources of religious knowledge – he at least paved the way for their arrival in his writings in the late seventeenth century. Like the Deists, he was appalled at the way commitment to irrational, supernatural doctrines had compelled people to behave in immoral ways. He opened his 1698 essay on "Error" with a critique of this distinction between orthodoxy and heresy:

> The great division amongst Christians is about Opinions. Every sect has its set of them & that is called Orthodoxie. And he who professes his assent to them though with an implicit faith & without examining he is Orthodox & in the way to salvation. But if he examines & thereupon questions any one of them, he is presently suspected of Heresie & if he oppose them or hold the contrary he is presently condemnd as in a damnable Error & the sure way to perdition. Of this one may say that there is nor can be nothing more wrong.[29]

In contrast to those who define religion in terms of propositional doctrines, Locke defined religion in terms of morality, the knowledge of good or bad actions, and he articulated Christianity's essence as the law or rule of God. The "divine law" refers to the "law which God has set to the actions of men, whether promulgated to them by the light of nature, or the voice of revelation."[30] The law of God must be wholly rational, for a person cannot assent to revelation if there is no "evidence of its being a revelation."[31] According to Locke, "reason must be our last judge and guide in every thing," including our examination of whether a supposed revelation "be a revelation from God or no."[32] His 1695 *Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* developed his account, his liberal mediation, of what he considered to be the original, rational Christianity,

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which he interpreted as being focused strictly on the messiahship of Jesus and the kingdom of the Messiah – a kingdom of virtue and morality defined by the law of God. The law of God is identical with the moral and rational law of nature, but the advantage of Christianity is that one receives justification by faith despite failing to keep the law. By design, Locke restricted his analysis to the four Gospels and the book of Acts. The message of these texts, he says, is "obvious to any one who reads the New Testament."[33]

Unfortunately, the liberal Protestant message Locke found in the New Testament was not obvious to his detractors, who accused him of Socinianism – a label originally referring to the views of the anti-trinitarian Polish Brethren, who were guided theologically by the Italian Anabaptist Fausto Sozzini, though the term eventually became a generic label for anyone with heterodox beliefs. The Calvinist divine and controversialist John Edwards (1637–1716) wrote many works against the ostensible Socinianism of Locke. In *Socinianism Unmask'd*, Edwards argued that "besides the bare believing of Jesus to be the Messiah," it is necessary to believe a range of other doctrines, the whole set of them constituting "those *Evangelical Truths*, those *Christian Principles* which belong to the very Essence of Christianity."[34] Edwards perhaps had in mind the work of Richard Hooker, who was possibly the first to use the phrase "essence of Christianity," which he did in his well-known critique of Puritan theology and politics, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594). Near the start of the third book, where he develops his direct refutation of Puritan ecclesiology, Hooker writes: "The visible Church of Jesus Christ is therefore one, in outward profession of those things, which supernaturally appertain to the very essence of Christianity, and are necessarily required in every particular christian [*sic*] man."[35] English theology thus typically saw the phrase "essence of Christianity" used not by liberals and Deists but instead by the conservative defenders of Christian tradition – foreshadowing the later interest in the rule of faith.

The opposite was the case on the continent. French mystics in the seventeenth century, such as Jean de Saint-Samson (1571–1636) and Madame Guyon (1648–1717), spoke of the "essence of the Christian religion" (*l'essence de la religion chrétienne*) to emphasize the contemplative experience of divine love above doctrines and practices.[36] For the

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mystics, like the pre-Reformation Brethren, talk of the essence of Christian religion was a way of refocusing the church around the virtues of faith, hope, and love. But the most significant developments happened in Germany, where talk of the essence of Christianity (*das Wesen des Christentums*) began to occur in the eighteenth century with the spread of Enlightenment thought. Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), the leading German rationalist theologian of that time, was influenced by English Deism and shared its rational and moral approach to Christianity. The school of German rationalist theology was known at the time as neology – the study of new things. In 1771 Semler defined the essence of Christian religion as the freedom of a person to use their rational faculties in distinction from official doctrine, and in 1779 he defined the essence as "a new moral or spiritual mindset" based on "the sublime teachings of Jesus."[37] The battle between the rationalists and the suprarationalists had reached a stalemate, with each side fixed in its understanding of Christianity as being about either natural morality or supernatural doctrine.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) surveyed the available theological paths and found them wanting. Following his father's religious awakening, the young Schleiermacher was sent in 1783 to the religious school of the Moravian Brethren at Niesky. While this environment instilled in him a deep sensitivity to religious experience, the conservative doctrinal atmosphere stifled his inquisitive and critical mind. He ultimately broke with his father's pietist convictions and charted his own path, but some of what he learned from the Brethren stayed with him. Like the rationalists and Deists, Schleiermacher was critical of traditional orthodox doctrine, but he was just as critical of their replacement of a system of doctrine with a system of law and morality. His alternative, first formulated in the second speech of his famous *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (1799), was to define the essence of religion as "neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling."[38] Thinking and acting, or what he refers to as metaphysics and morals, are parochial and myopic; they think all that matters is what humans believe and accomplish. Religion, however, "wishes to intuit the universe, wishes devoutly to overhear the universe's own manifestations and actions, longs to be grasped and filled

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by the universe's immediate influences in childlike passivity."[39] The essence of religion, according to Schleiermacher, is a mystical sensitivity to the totality of life and nature, an openness to the holiness of all things. In distinction from both morals and metaphysics, "religion is the sensibility and taste for the infinite," by which he meant the divine.[40] In both his early and later work, he then defined the distinctive essence of Christianity as the manifestation of the infinite (God) in the finite, the way the finite resists and opposes the infinite, and finally the way the infinite overcomes this resistance through the reconciling work of Christ.

In his later systematic theology, *The Christian Faith*, Schleiermacher said that the essence of religion or piety that forms the basis for Christian community is "neither a knowing nor a doing but a distinct formation of feeling." The feeling he refers to here is the feeling of being "absolutely dependent" on God, the source of all life and existence.[41] For Schleiermacher, Christianity is rooted in a reality that is beyond the ability of our reason to grasp or our moral action to achieve, and what he called "feeling" was his way of describing the relation one has to this ultimate reality. The divine truth that theology seeks to bring to expression in language is therefore neither absolutely beyond reason (as traditional orthodoxy would have it) nor absolutely rational (as the Deists would have it). Instead, "all propositions of a Christian sort are superrational in one respect, whereas in another respect they are all also rational." Theology is suprarational insofar as it refers to the transcendent reality that makes something "distinctively Christian," but it is rational insofar as it necessarily follows the same rules for language and meaning as any other discourse.[42] Schleiermacher thus found a way to carry out the mediation of Christian theology in a way that embraced the role of Enlightenment reason while also preventing the reduction of the Christian faith to something purely rational and natural.

HISTORICIZING THE QUEST

Schleiermacher was a pivotal turning point in the history of prescriptivism for the way he broke the standoffs between thinking and doing, on the one hand, and between reason and revelation, on the other. His novel alternative was to locate the essence of Christianity in prereflective

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feeling – the feeling of being absolutely dependent – and to understand the theological account of this feeling as both wholly rational and wholly supurational. His mediating proposal provided a way for Christians to embrace modernity while preserving the essence of orthodoxy.

During Schleiermacher's influential life, another intellectual revolution was gathering momentum. Beginning by the late seventeenth century, the scientific revolution advanced beyond the study of the natural world to include the social world – the ideas, cultures, and societies of history.[43] Human history itself became a scientific object of study, open to analysis and critique on the basis of evidence. Modern humanity not only had scientific consciousness (i.e., the consciousness of living in a world governed by natural laws), but now it also had historical consciousness (i.e., the consciousness of shaping and being shaped by historical contexts). By the late eighteenth century, the accumulation of textual and archaeological evidence propelled the study of history out of the abstract realm of theology and political theory into a practical science that quickly came to shape how everyone sees the world. In the same way that people could no longer go back to a geocentric cosmos, so too people could no longer go back to a time when events were determined by divine law in a perfect synchronicity between the earth below and the heavens above.

Germany in the nineteenth century was at the vanguard of this revolution in historical understanding, and Schleiermacher's intellectual rival, G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), was the leading philosopher of history and historical consciousness. Both Schleiermacher and Hegel engaged in mediation in an effort to synthesize Christian faith and modern reason – Schleiermacher by means of an "eternal covenant" and Hegel by means of "reconciliation."[44] Both articulated an essence, but whereas Schleiermacher spoke of the essence of religion in more mystical and pietistic terms as a feeling that eludes rational articulation, Hegel defined the essence as spirit (*Geist*), which is rational self-consciousness, and this rational spirit has to work through its appearance within history in order to become reconciled with itself. For Hegel, historical consciousness was thus integral to the development of reason. The Hegelians split into two parties. The Hegelian Right, represented by the likes of Karl Daub and Philip Marheineke, identified the spirit with

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God and found in Hegel's philosophy a way of historicizing traditional metaphysics. The Hegelian Left, including David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, appropriated Hegel's historical dialectic to critique orthodox Christianity, even religion itself – most powerfully in Feuerbach's work, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Picking up on a theme in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Feuerbach (1804–1872) defined the essence of religion as the essence of humanity as such, which he regarded as self-consciousness: the consciousness of the infinite (religion) is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinite nature of consciousness itself.[45] Also worth mentioning here is Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), who straddled the divide between Schleiermacher and Hegel and was the first to develop a historical theology that employed historical criticism in the analysis of sources. Through a critical interpretation of the synoptic Gospels, Baur in his final years modified his understanding of the essence of Christianity and arrived at a position similar to that of Locke, in the sense that Baur came to define the essence in terms of Christianity's ethical character based on the moral teachings of Jesus.[46]

Those who followed Schleiermacher rather than Hegel could not avoid engaging in the historical analysis of Christianity that the Hegelians had promoted. The paradigmatic and defining figure of late nineteenth-century liberal theology, Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), began as a member of Baur's school but later abandoned the Hegelian method (including anything suggestive of metaphysics) in favor of a more Lutheran and Schleiermacherian approach that emphasized the experience of the religious community, particularly the experience of justification. Like Baur, he carried out his systematic theology by means of a rigorous history of doctrine. But for Ritschl the guiding principle of Christianity is not some abstract spirit or rational idea; instead, it was a soteriological essence defined by the historical and redemptive relation to the person of Jesus. Ritschl criticized what he called Socinian and Enlightenment theologians – here he had in mind the likes of Locke and Semler – for their "philosophical naturalism and religious and moral individualism," which led them to see "no natural connection ... between the forgiveness of sins and the historical position of Christ."[47] Ritschl, in this sense, was a strong defender of Christian tradition, but he

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interpreted this tradition in historical terms. He defended the tradition against rationalist critics without defending the metaphysical and supernatural doctrines that formerly communicated this tradition.

In contrast to Enlightenment individualism, Ritschl advocated a robust doctrine of Christian community and society under the rubric of the "Kingdom of God." A key feature of Ritschl's liberalism was his conception of God's kingdom as a social entity, a visible cultural community embodying the moral virtues of the Christian life in the world. The kingdom of God is the anthropological correlate of the doctrine of God. Insofar as "God is love," the kingdom is the civic society that embodies this universal love of neighbor.[48] The kingdom is therefore the human association, encompassing as many people as possible, characterized by moral action among its members that reflects the character of God. The difference between the church and the kingdom is that the church is strictly a "worshipping community" defined by "devotional action," whereas the kingdom is a civic community defined by "moral action." These are not two different communities but the same community in two different modes. "Those who believe in Christ, therefore, constitute a Church in so far as they express in prayer their faith in God the Father," while "the *same believers* in Christ constitute the Kingdom of God in so far as, forgetting distinctions of sex, rank, or nationality, they act reciprocally from love, and thus call into existence that fellowship of moral disposition and moral blessings which extends, through all possible gradations, to the limits of the human race."[49] The Ritschlian school of liberal theology thus consisted of both a critique of orthodox dogma and a fidelity to Jesus as the central historical fact and object of faith, and it connected both to an account of God's kingdom as the sociocultural context for and goal of the Christian life.

The apotheosis of nineteenth-century liberal and historicist theology appeared in the work of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), whose name is most associated today with talk of the essence of Christianity because of his famous and highly influential lectures on that topic in the winter semester of 1899–1900, published in German as *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity) and published in English as *What Is Christianity?*[50] Harnack was trained in conservative Lutheran theology but later gravitated toward Ritschl's combination of historical

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analysis and Jesus-piety. Both are on full display in his lectures on the essence of Christianity. In his opening lecture Harnack said "it is solely in its historical sense," using "the methods of historical science," that he would attempt to understand the Christian essence.[51] While he did not use this language, he made it clear that his aim was to provide a descriptivist account of Christianity in contrast to a prescriptivist. He rejected those approaches to the essence that were carried out by what he called apologists and philosophers of religion: the former referred to those who tried to defend Christianity's enduring value by showing how much good it has done for society; the latter referred to those philosophers and theologians, like Schleiermacher, who tried to identify a normative essence of religion in general, and then defined Christianity accordingly. Both of these approaches were so invested in a prescriptive, normative account of Christian identity that they failed to do justice to the historical diversity and development of Christianity. The purpose of his historical investigation was to be more honest about what Christianity essentially is, and this meant neither cherry-picking the examples that would prove how great Christianity is nor speaking about some abstract, timeless Christianity that bears little similarity to what we actually see on the ground. Whatever we make of Harnack's understanding of the Christian essence, we must keep in mind the intention of his project, which retains its validity regardless of the way he carried it out. In a way, Harnack was trying to answer the question posed by Andrew Walls at the start of this chapter: What holds Christianity together through all the twists and turns of history?

Harnack's descriptive approach meant that he placed no restrictions on the source material for his analysis of the essence, but since he was seeking to find the essence and not merely provide a descriptive history of Christianity, he was obliged to differentiate between the essential and inessential elements. This led him to his most famous – perhaps infamous – metaphor: namely, that his goal was "to grasp what is essential in the phenomena, and to distinguish kernel and husk."[52] The language of husk and kernel has been unjustly maligned in the decades since he gave this lecture. To be sure, the metaphor, taken literally, is crudely simplistic and suggests that within the messiness of history there is a clean, pure nugget of timeless truth just waiting to be discovered. Harnack meant no

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such thing, as he made very clear. The metaphor, like the other metaphors for the essence of Christianity that I presented above, is imperfect and prone to distortion, but only if taken out of the larger context of Harnack's argument and thus shorn of any nuance and explication. He explained what he meant by the "husk" in the following paragraph, where he stated that "Jesus Christ and his disciples were situated in their day just as we are situated in ours," and like us they "were bounded by the horizon and the framework" of their time and location.[53] They could not have been otherwise and still be human. The question, then, is whether one can differentiate between this horizon and something enduring – not necessarily timeless but at least meaningful in situations outside of its native context. Whatever that something is, that is the kernel. To deny that any such kernel exists is tantamount to denying any continuity in Christianity at all, for then every particular community would be trapped in its cultural and historical framework, incapable of drawing upon the past or bequeathing its wisdom to the future. Denying the distinction between husk and kernel would be the death of tradition as such. We can nuance and complicate this distinction, but rejecting it out of hand would mean each community is incommensurable with every other.

As a historian of Christianity, Harnack sided with those who see continuity over time, even if the tradition changes dramatically from one age to the next. He saw it as the central task and "highest duty" of the historian "to determine what is of permanent value" in each historical form of Christian life. But this does not mean the essence is changeless. Indeed, when it came to defining what this "gospel" is, Harnack wrote:

> There are only two possibilities here: either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which, under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity. The latter is the true view. The history of the Church shows us in its very commencement that "primitive Christianity" had to disappear in order that "Christianity" might remain; and in the same way in later ages one metamorphosis followed upon another. From the beginning it was a question of getting rid of formulas, correcting expectations, altering ways of feeling, and this is a process to

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> which there is no end. But by the very fact that our survey embraces the whole course as well as the inception we enhance our standard of value of what is essential and of real value.[54]

Harnack here acknowledged, in contrast to those who assume his kernel was a static entity, that the essence of Christianity changes over time. As I pointed out already, the theologian Ernst Troeltsch, who wrote an important essay in 1903 on the essence of Christianity in response to Harnack's lectures, observed in 1913 that "the essence of Christianity differs in different epochs."[55] For this reason, Harnack's analysis of the Christian essence necessarily embraced, at least in principle, "the whole course" of Christianity in order to have as complete a picture as possible. But the historical theologian, according to Harnack, cannot simply repeat "the 'whole' Gospel," as if it were possible to make every detail and every permutation of Christianity normative. Each person is a child of their age, and for that reason we are tasked with the responsibility of discerning what is essential within the panoply of Christian history.[56]

What then did Harnack find to be essential? His answer was threefold: (1) "the kingdom of God and its coming," (2) "God the Father and the infinite value of the human soul," and (3) "the higher righteousness and the commandment of love."[57] Each of these was an aspect of Jesus's original message that retained its force throughout Christian history, even if the way people describe and interpret these ideas changes over time. Instead of the "kingdom of God" some speak of the commonwealth, reign, or "kindom" of God. Instead of "the infinite value of the human soul" we speak today of the dignity of each person. Instead of "higher righteousness" we might speak of Christian ethics or moral formation. The concept of the kingdom of God was a particularly vexing one for Harnack. While he was aware that what his contemporaries meant by this concept was a far cry from what Jesus and his early followers meant – though Harnack is perhaps not as sufficiently aware of this disparity as we are today, a point to which I will return below – he rightly pointed out the ambiguity surrounding this idea in the Gospels themselves, which speak of the kingdom at times as something "purely future" and external to us and at other times as something "already present" and within us.[58] This ambiguity resident in the biblical texts

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themselves makes it possible for later generations to interpret the kingdom in vastly disparate ways without abandoning their continuity with Jesus.

Well over a century since they were first given, Harnack's lectures are due for reconsideration. The details of his account of the essence are certainly dated and demand scrutiny, and since delivering the lectures the world has changed dramatically. Among other things, Harnack lived before the Pentecostal movement and globalization dramatically shifted the landscape of world Christianity. He lived at a time when the idea of miracles was no longer meaningful. While he acknowledged that "the Gospels come from a time in which the marvellous may be said to have been something of almost daily occurrence," that world no longer existed, at least not for him (or for myself, I must admit).[59] But for many today it remains alive and well. How then does one incorporate this into an understanding of the essence? Harnack's account arguably already makes space for this in his idea of the kingdom of God. The kingdom, he said, "is something supernatural, a gift from above, not a product of ordinary life." And even if religious people today reject the miraculous, they remain convinced that they are "not shut up within a blind and brutal course of Nature."[60] Some will interpret the "supernatural" character of God's kingdom to mean visible occurrences that are directly attributable to divine power, while others find any such competition between divine power and natural occurrences to be contrary to both reason and revelation. Nevertheless, the fact that both can find themselves in Harnack's category demonstrates the enduring power of his proposal.

ESCHATOLOGIZING THE QUEST

For all the insight of Harnack's historicizing of the quest, it marked the end of an age. The liberal synthesis of Christianity and modern European culture that began with the likes of Locke finally reached its conclusion with the generation of Harnack. This grand experiment in mediation was just as rich and profound, not to mention varied, in its results as was the medieval synthesis that preceded it. Whereas the medieval synthesis arose within an ecclesiastical empire, in which all

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things were determined by the church, the modern liberal synthesis had no such hierarchical guidance and thus took the form of a quest "from below" to discern what about Christianity could and should endure within the new world of modern science and human enlightenment. While much of this quest remains vital, it became clear around the time of Harnack's lectures that at least one essential feature of Christianity had been lost: eschatology. Seven years before Harnack's famous lecture series, Ritschl's son-in-law, Johannes Weiss, published a brief work on Jesus's preaching of the kingdom of God, in which he argued that the kingdom expected by Jesus was not a civil society of love and goodwill but rather the eschatological end of the world.[61] The book, and the research it instigated, highlighted the unbridgeable disparity between Jesus and modern Western society, but it was ultimately the devastation wrought by the First World War that brought an end to the Ritschlian liberalism that had grounded so much of its theology on the confidence that an enlightened European society stood in direct continuity with what Jesus had proclaimed.

In the wake of the war's wreckage, a new theological movement arose to provide a massive course correction to the quest. The movement was known as dialectical theology, and its originator was Karl Barth (1886–1968). He was joined by Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), Friedrich Gogarten (1887–1967), and Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974), among others. The group was trained by the leading figures in liberal and historicist theology, including Harnack himself. The dialectical theologians criticized their teachers for turning the essence of Christianity into an objective feature of world history, a social and cultural fact accessible to anyone with the right scientific tools. Against this, dialectical theology argued that the essence of Christianity, the object of faith and theology, is a divine word, the act of divine revelation itself, and by definition this cannot be a historical object because God is not an entity within history. God stands over against the world in both judgment and grace as the "wholly other" God – not wholly other in an abstract, philosophical sense, but in the *eschatological* sense that one finds in scripture. In the second edition of his book, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922; 1st edition, 1919), the book that launched this movement, Barth declared: "Christianity that is not wholly

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and completely eschatology has wholly and completely nothing to do with *Christ*."[62] Bultmann throughout his career said the same thing in a more historical register, arguing for the essentially eschatological nature of Christianity on the basis of its origins in the eschatological preaching of Jesus and the early community's understanding of itself as an "eschatological community" in which the "eschatological event" of redemption in Christ was "already being realized in the present."[63] Bultmann summarized his position in his 1955 Gifford Lectures: "In early Christianity history is swallowed up in eschatology. The early Christian community understands itself not as a historical but as an eschatological phenomenon. It is conscious that it belongs no longer to the present world but to the new Aeon which is at the door."[64] Gogarten followed the work of Barth and Bultmann on this point. In a book on the question of the essence of Christianity, titled *What Is Christianity?* (1956), Gogarten stated: "The Christian faith in its essence is hope for the future, so that we can even say it is quite truly the disclosure of the future."[65] Using similar language, Bultmann wrote in 1958 that Christianity can be understood "in its essence as an eschatological phenomenon." To be a Christian is to have an "eschatological existence," so that believers now see themselves as being removed from the world (what Bultmann called being "deworldized") while paradoxically remaining within the world.[66] This paradox of being simultaneously fully historical and fully eschatological is what dialectical theology understands as the essence of Christianity.

In addition to dialectical theology, this school of thought is also known as word-of-God theology and kerygmatic theology, because "word of God" and "kerygma" were the two terms, in addition to "revelation," that these theologians used to name the essence of Christianity as they understood it. Each term had its benefits and drawbacks. The word "revelation" was the most well-established already and thus the most widely used by this movement, though they had to expend significant energy countering the notion of natural revelation. While revelation rightly implies the disclosure of something new and previously unknown, it is also frequently treated as a static noun and conflated with the Bible. Barth often had to remind his readers that revelation, as he understood it, was always a *revealing* and never a *revealedness*.[67] Revelation for the

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dialectical theologians was not an object but an act and event – a divinely wrought occurrence in which the eschatological reality of God confronted people within history. For this reason, "word of God" and "kerygma" (derived from the Greek word meaning "proclamation") were more effective terms for naming this divine act.

Barth's theology from the start was focused on the importance of the word (and Word) of God.[68] In his 1924 lectures on dogmatics, Barth used the Latin phrase *Deus dixit*, "God has spoken," to refer to this revelatory word.[69] His later *Church Dogmatics* defined the norm and method of theology as "the revelation which Scripture attests as the Word of God."[70] The task of theology is to present and analyze the action of God that takes place in this word. Barth is reticent, however, to view God's word as the "essence of Christianity." He associates this term with a history that goes back to Protestant orthodoxy's notion of a "foundation of faith" (*fundamentum fidei*), which made a distinction between essential and inessential doctrines. Later rationalist and liberal theologians changed what they regarded as essential, but the overall structure remained the same. Barth's concern with this whole approach is that it settles down too comfortably with a fixed idea of what the object and content of theology ought to be. According to Barth, the object of theology cannot be reduced to "any view, or idea, or principle," because it is instead "the work and activity of God."[71] The place occupied by an essence or principle "belongs by right to the Word of God, and the Word of God alone." This does not necessarily rule out the essence of Christianity as such. Barth admits in the same paragraph that "dogmatics certainly has a basis, foundation, and centre," but the point is that "this centre is not something which is under our control, but something which exercises control over us."[72] Barth still has an essence of Christianity, but it is unlike the essences of previous generations, at least as he understands it. Whereas earlier accounts of the essence confined the word of God to a basic doctrine or theological principle, Barth understands the essence as an event – an eschatological event – that is "ready for new insights" and consists in an "openness to receive new truth."[73] In contrast to previous theologies, dialectical theology understands the essence to be "the Word of God itself" and "not a conception of it."[74] Whereas a concept of the word has nothing new to say, the word of God itself

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proclaims new truths in each new situation. For this reason, Sykes says that Barth represents "the most radical version" of the liberal "inwardness tradition" regarding the essence of Christianity, because the essence for him "is literally inexpressible, since it consists not of doctrines but of the disposition of openness, of expectant obedience. No mere doctrines are ever permanent or unchangeable, nor are any forms of church government."[75] In a sense, Barth has provided an essence that can make sense of the diversity of Christian history. Whereas Troeltsch pointed out that the essence differs in different epochs, for Barth this historical change does not undermine the essence of Christianity but instead confirms a different and more flexible account of the essence: one that is capable of changing in correspondence to the changes in history.

As a New Testament scholar, Bultmann used the term kerygma to serve the same purpose. The word had a long history already of being used to identify the essence of Christianity. In 1777, Semler pointed out that from "the beginning of the Christian religion" there was a distinction between *kērygma* as the essential truth of the Christian religion and *dogmata* as the religious doctrines that were true only for a particular time and place.[76] As I discussed above, Semler advocated for the rational critique of the latter in support of the former. Like Semler, Harnack used the term *kērygma* to refer to the beliefs about God and Jesus that characterized the earliest community of Jesus followers. There were "separate *Kerygmata* about God and Christ." The kerygma about God referred to God as the all-powerful creator, while the kerygma about Jesus referred to him as the fulfillment of prophecy and the "Son of God," and spoke of his death, resurrection, and return. These *kerygmata* were integrated into the baptismal formula, which became the basis for the *regula fidei* and the later creeds.[77] Martin Dibelius, one of the pioneers of New Testament form criticism, brought the term into New Testament studies in his 1919 work on the formation of the Gospels, where he identified the kerygma with the earliest preaching about Jesus, which he finds in paradigmatic form in places like Acts 2:22–24 and 10:36–41.[78] Bultmann then picked up the term from Dibelius. But it functioned strictly in this historical sense until Barth, in 1924, stated in his theological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15 that "*kerygma* is based on revelation." Bultmann published a review of this book in 1926 and

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commented on this passage, and from that point on he began to incorporate this theological understanding of kerygma into his work, in which the kerygma is another way of naming the revelatory event of God's word.[79] Understood this way, the kerygma increasingly took on an *eschatological* meaning. This shift from history to eschatology also involved shifting from a concept with a clear, objective definition to one that could never be absolutely defined. Just as the eschatological God remains wholly other and ungraspable, so too "the kerygma is just what theology can never seize in definitive form." Because the kerygma is "nothing else than God's word," it is as transcendent as God is and cannot be confined to any linguistic expression – even something as simple as "Jesus, Lord" (2 Cor 4:5).[80] Like Barth's concept of the word of God, Bultmann's kerygma serves to ground theology on the act of God's revelation while also empowering the translation of Christian faith into an unlimited variety of historical forms.

While the dialectical theologians portrayed themselves as tireless opponents of the quest for the essence of Christianity and were the most vocal critics of the rationalist, liberal, and historicist theologians who pioneered the quest, dialectical theology was in fact the pinnacle of the quest, insofar as it implicitly advocated a concept of the essence of Christianity that provided a theological grounding for the quest as a whole. Many of the theologians reviewed above thought they had arrived at the one correct account of the Christian essence, and this misplaced confidence was what Barth and the other dialectical theologians rejected as an encroachment on the eschatological transcendence of God. But precisely in rejecting this confidence, they articulated a version of the essence that affirmed the legitimacy, at least in principle, of these other definitions. That was not how their work was received by English-speaking theologians, however, as we will see in the following chapter.

LIBERATING THE QUEST

Speaking of anglophone theology, theologians in the United States made a distinctive contribution to the quest that departed from the European tradition and lay the foundation for the developments of the late twentieth century. We can describe this stage in the quest as the *politicizing* of

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the essence. This development has its origins in the Lockean and rationalist account of the essence as the moral law, which then filtered its way through the American liberal tradition among Unitarians, revivalists, abolitionists, and moral reformers who readily dispensed with doctrine in favor of practice as the central criterion of genuine faith. The innovative revivalist Charles Finney (1792–1875) was paradigmatic of this mentality, writing in his 1835 work, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, that Christianity throughout history had become very good at producing people who were perfectly orthodox in their ideas while being entirely heretical in their actions. He argued, in contrast, that "the only design of doctrine is to produce practice, and it does not seem to be understood by the church, that *true faith* 'works by love and purifies the heart,' that heresy in *practice* is proof conclusive of heresy in sentiment."[81] Practice became the essence of Christianity for Finney, though he did not use that language. "Anything brought forward as doctrine, which cannot be made use of as practical," is not truly Christian and thus not true doctrine.[82] By contrast, he implied, anything that *is* practical for the faith is worthy of being considered doctrine.

What changed at the start of the twentieth century was that the moral and practical essence of previous decades became an explicitly *political* essence with the rise of socialist Christians who engaged directly with the policies and institutions of the political order. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) is the most notable of this group. In his diagnosis of where Christian went astray, Rauschenbusch went back to the second century, after which point "dogma came to be regarded as the essence of Christianity."[83] The result of this change, he argued, was the depoliticization of Christianity. As the early Christ followers became "a firmly organized, authoritative, and international ecclesiastical organization," the work of Christianity was reduced to the work of the church, focused on its own maintenance and expansion. The goal of the loyal Christian was to have the correct doctrine and preserve the apostolic tradition. "Christian ethics became churchly ethics," so that actions were moral if they served the cause of the church.[84] The church confined its radical vision to the spiritual interiority of the soul's salvation, leaving all politics to the state – to the empire with which it was in comfortable partnership. Christianity thus failed to accomplish the task of "social regeneration"

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that Rauschenbusch argued was part of its original purpose.[85] Implicit in his argument was the claim that the true essence of Christianity is sociopolitical transformation: the creation of a society defined by the message of Jesus. For Rauschenbusch, this meant partnering with socialism, whose views were "the most thorough consistent economic elaboration of the Christian social ideal."[86] Rauschenbusch was writing at a time when socialist mayors were running over two hundred small cities across the United States, filling people like Rauschenbusch with hope for the future.[87] He was critical of organized socialism, however, because of its own tendency toward dogmatic orthodoxy. In the same way that Christianity went astray by focusing on maintaining the church as an end in itself, so too Rauschenbusch was concerned that the socialist parties might solidify into "a narrow and jealous orthodoxy" focused on maintaining the party as an end in itself, something he also saw in the Republican Party and religious organizations.[88] Put another way, both Christians and political party activists needed to orient themselves around their proper practical essence.

The politicizing of the essence took a decisive turn with the rise of liberation theology in the wake of the civil rights movement and global student and antiwar protests. James Cone (1938–2018), one of the original architects of liberation theology, was unsatisfied with the notion that depoliticization was the problem, since the truth of the biblical story is "that God is not simply the God of politics but the God of the politics of the oppressed, liberating them from bondage."[89] From the vantage point of Black experience, the problem was not merely the institutional separation between Christianity and politics but the promotion of a false theology that led to a politics of the status quo. White status quo Christians "were wrong ethically because they were wrong *theologically*."[90] Cone's critique of white theology was reflected in his engagement with the question of the Christian essence. In his earliest works, in which he used the writings of Barth and other European theologians to lay the groundwork for his theology of liberation, Cone expressed his alternative to status quo theology as a clarification of the liberal tradition of the essence. Explicitly referring to Schleiermacher's *Christian Faith*, Cone wrote in *Black Theology and Black Power*: "Christ is the essence of Christianity. . . . Christianity revolves around a Person, without whom its

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existence ceases to be."[91] The following year, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone said "the answer to the question 'What is the essence of Christianity?' can be given in the two words: Jesus Christ."[92] Cone's revision to this old white European question was to insist that "the essence of the biblical message" had to be united with "the struggle for black liberation," which ultimately meant insisting that "Christ is black" and even "God is black."[93] As Cone moved away from engaging European theology toward drawing on Black traditions of spirituals and blues as the source material for his theology, he left behind the quest for the essence at the explicit level, though his work was still an implicit contribution to the quest – one that stressed the importance of placing the liberation of the oppressed at the heart of the Christian story.

Cone's work was significant for the way it placed liberation at the center of Christian theology, but it was less concretely political than Rauschenbusch's work. It was the Latin American liberation theologians – including, *inter alia*, Gustavo Gutiérrez (1928–), Juan Luis Segundo (1925–1996), and Ignacio Ellacuría (1930–1989) – who emphasized the specifically political nature of liberation theology through their use of Marxian thought and their focus on class struggle. Gutiérrez thus defined theology as critical reflection on praxis, understanding praxis both historically in terms of political struggle and theologically as orthopraxis (right action).[94] Segundo countered what he called the "political taboo" head on by arguing that "every theology is political," and that "there is no such thing as Christian theology" without a "prior political commitment" – specifically, the personal commitment to the liberation of the oppressed.[95] For Segundo, this meant that the Christian norms have to be understood as political from the start, in the sense of being allied with a particular party and ideology. This decision or option to be on one political side is essential to having Christian norms in the first place. The attempt to impose supposedly apolitical Christian norms onto politics eventually turns into "third-way stands" that become counter-revolutionary in the face of a revolutionary moment.[96] In other words, the notion that Christian norms are originally apolitical is already a decision in favor of right-wing politics.

These Latin American works were not engaged in the European quest that had defined the broad tradition of modern liberal theology, but

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they, along with their North American counterparts, still offered a compelling answer to the basic question about the identity of Christianity, one that still reverberates in today's religious discourse. Whether in terms of support or opposition, the liberationist essence of Christianity set the terms of debate in the late twentieth century, as all discourse became highly politicized. While Rauschenbusch and Segundo thought it was self-evident that a genuinely Christian politics should be leftist, the rise of reactionary, counterrevolutionary theology in recent decades has, in effect, taken their account of the Christian essence and completely inverted it, generating an antiemancipatory, right-wing political theology governed by a preferential option for the status quo – even, in some instances, for the oppressors themselves.

THE QUEST FOR THE ESSENCE AND THE RULE OF FAITH

From a certain perspective, the liberal quest for the essence of Christianity – whose heyday lasted roughly from 1650 to 1950 – seems like a three-century-long digression from our main topic. Both before and, as I will explore in the following chapters, after the quest, the rule of faith generally dominated the discussion of what defines Christian faith and identity, insofar as there was any discussion at all. Proponents of the rule of faith today like to claim they are simply continuing the premodern tradition of the rule. The interest in the essence, according to this view, was a massive mistake, and to correct that mistake all we need to do is return to the consensus tradition of the church. But it's not that simple. The more recent interest in the rule of faith is quite different from the earlier rule of faith, even if the doctrinal propositions are the same, and we can only understand that difference by first grasping the intervening quest for the essence of Christianity and how it shaped the discourse about what it means to be Christian.

As much as some would like to blame the quest and all those who participated in it for the departures from what they consider orthodoxy, the reality is that the quest was not the initiator but the response to a rapidly and dramatically changing world. Today we name this period of change "modernity," which is shorthand for the many historical, institutional, scientific, and philosophical revolutions that transformed

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Western society and the self-understanding of those who lived within these parts of the world. While some today claim it was an error for Christians to adapt to these new conditions, it would not be the first time Christianity learned to adjust to a new environment. Indeed, missiologists like Walls frequently observe that change has been part and parcel of Christianity from the beginning, starting with the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Walls's thought experiment is a way of highlighting how Christians have learned to accommodate radically different social, cultural, and political situations. Those who oppose the accommodation of Western modernity imply there are some cultural conditions that are incompatible with Christian faith, which ironically presupposes a more limited and inflexible understanding of Christianity than classical Christianity traditionally had.[97]

What the quest exposed is what should have always been plain to see – namely, that there is no single right way to be Christian. This had been harder to recognize when the ecclesiastical authorities were able to control the narrative and determine who was orthodox and who was a heretic. And in the days before mass media, ideas were preserved only when enough people wanted them preserved, and often this meant that marginal and heterodox ideas were only passed down by those who were writing *against* them. The rise of modernity coincided with, and was arguably caused by, the collapse of the authority structures and the easy spread of new ideas. Modernity thus forced people to make a heretical choice – heresy coming from *hairesis*, meaning "choice" – to decide where they stood vis-à-vis this new social context. Some embraced it and sought to adapt Christianity to modernity; others ignored it and pretended modernity did not happen; and still others opposed it and developed accounts of Christianity designed to counteract modernity.

Unfortunately, even the liberal theologians who embraced modernity still fought among themselves over which version of the essence was the "right" one. These disputes could often be vicious, leading to rival schools that viewed each other as enemies of the truth (e.g., the Left and Right Hegelians). The most notable example of this was the group of dialectical theologians, many of whom disparaged all liberal and historicist theologians as having abandoned revelation and genuine God-talk. Such overblown rhetoric did not make their own contribution to the

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quest any less a part of the modern liberal tradition. All it did was demonstrate the vast flexibility of liberal theology, even if their grandiloquence suggested that no flexibility was allowed. The task ahead of us is to glean what lessons we can from the history of the modern quest for the essence for constructing a better prescriptivism today, without repeating the tendency to declare one's account the only valid version.

This chapter has surveyed many, though by no means all, of the ways that theologians adapted Christianity to the modern period. To borrow from Schleiermacher, we can subdivide these different accounts of the essence into those characterized by *thinking*, *doing*, and *feeling* – or, put differently, reason, morality, and experience. These categories line up with the three dimensions of religiosity that Jocelyne Cesari, drawing on the work of earlier sociologists of religion, uses to understand religion in modernity: the "three Bs" of believing, behaving, and belonging.[98] These three aspects – creeds and beliefs, religious and social practices, and collective identity – correspond with Schleiermacher's categories and provide a useful rubric for mapping the liberal and conservative quests for normative Christianity.

Among those who embraced modernity, the ones who emphasized *thinking* tended to reject traditional Christian orthodoxy as irrational, still too bound up with myth. Hegel and the idealist thinkers who followed in his wake were a prime example of this. They identified the concept of God with Absolute Reason, which for some of them was the teleological fulfillment of human reason itself, while for others was the divine mind as a transcendent rational agent distinct from the world. But the rational and metaphysical reconstruction of Christianity was not the only available path. Barth would want to place many of the Protestant orthodox theologians in this category, those Reformed and Lutheran scholastics and suprarationalists who believed that divine revelation was something objective and doctrinal in nature and sought to use the tools of reason to their benefit. I would treat them as forerunners instead of the modern rule of faith, a precursor to those Protestant apologists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in Great Britain and North America – such as William Paley, J. Gresham Machen, C. S. Lewis, and Gordon Clark – who mobilized rational proofs and observable

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evidence to defend what they understood to be the truth of traditional Christian teachings.

Others accommodated Christianity to modernity by taking the route of *doing* and locating the essence of the faith in its moral creed. Locke is a classic example of this approach, along with other Deist and rationalist thinkers, such as Semler. In the early American republic, the likes of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams followed in the footsteps of Locke and argued against doctrinal orthodoxy in favor of a liberal Christianity defined by natural religion and the moral law. In the Progressive Era, a more explicitly political approach to the moral essence arose in the work of Rauschenbusch and Vida Dutton Scudder, among others, and the liberation theologians took that further by connecting the Christian gospel with the struggle of the oppressed classes for emancipation. In a way, the moral interpretation of Christianity was the path of least resistance, since the Bible provides ample support for such a view. With the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew scriptures and the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, a moral essence of Christianity has much to commend it. This was a version of Christianity that, at least compared to the speculative accounts of the Hegelians, made sense to the average layperson. One did not need to be a Deist or Unitarian to find this essence of Christianity attractive. Another advantage of this approach is the bridge it builds with other religions, particularly those with less investment in metaphysics and more focus on personal and communal formation. Beyond the potential for interreligious dialogue, common moral precepts, shared across religions, were seen by many as pointing to something fundamentally true, something deeper than any individual religion's account of revelation – a transcendent moral point unifying the religions and thereby all of humanity.

The path less traveled was the way of *feeling* that had its origins in the medieval mystics but reached its modern apotheosis in Schleiermacher. To describe this category using the term "experience" can be misleading, because Schleiermacher's feeling (a poor translation of *Gefühl*) is arguably beyond experience, or rather *before* experience, referring not to a specific sensation or awareness in human consciousness but rather what Thandeka calls "the rupture in human consciousness" that marks the "border point" at which "all individuation has been canceled."[99] Put

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another way, feeling is a way of trying to capture something that is utterly outside of our grasp and so completely incapable of being analyzed like a rational doctrine or enacted like a moral command. We might call this experience mystical or spiritual, though these words are equally prone to misunderstanding. Feeling, according to Schleiermacher, is the ineffable sense we have of being in unity not only with ourselves but also with all reality – existing in connection with other people, the world, and with God. The dialectical theologians had a crude understanding of Schleiermacher's theology as referring to some inner experience that could be grasped, manufactured, and manipulated, and they were rightly suspicious of this idea, even if they wrongly attributed it to Schleiermacher himself due to their contemporaries who claimed to be following Schleiermacher's lead. In truth, the dialectical theologians, with their eschatological concept of revelation, were far closer than their liberal colleagues to Schleiermacher, and we would have to locate the eschatological essence that dialectical theology articulated within the category of Schleiermacher's *Gefühl*.

What bearing does all this have on the topic of the rule of faith? As I show in the next three chapters, the rise of the rule of faith in modern – or, rather, antimodern – theology is a reaction to these various efforts at defining the essence of Christianity. While proponents of the rule of faith champion it as the "historic Christian faith," a norm impervious to the passage of time, the truth is that the rule cannot escape its historical location. In fact, the rule of faith as it has developed over the past two hundred years encompasses each of Schleiermacher's three categories: reason, experience, and morality – now transposed into orthodox doctrine, cultural identity, and conservative politics. In its doctrinal, cultural, and moral formations, it is contingent on the quest for the essence, even as it tries to claim timeless validity. Today's rule of faith, which has come to mean much more than just creedal Christianity, is just as modern as the essence of Christianity that it rejects.

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