

## Foreword

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When Hans W. Frei died in 1988, he was hailed as perhaps the leading Anselmian theologian of his generation as well as the foremost historian of modern biblical hermeneutics in his day. He was also remembered, as someone remarked to me at the time, as probably “the kindest man in academic life.” Let me begin with a brief word about his personal qualities before turning to his academic accomplishments.

In relations with his students, Hans Frei possessed a rare gift of fatherly warmth and empathy. In particular, he managed to make each of his doctoral students feel affirmed and encouraged without provoking a sense of rivalry among them. As his colleague George Lindbeck noted at his memorial service, what Frei was to each of his students, he was to them all. He so mentored them as to give them “a common bond,” one that extended well beyond the classroom. In some cases their camaraderie, fostered by Frei, would persist for decades, as they continued to meet together for scholarly and theological discussion. Frei’s generosity, Lindbeck suggested, not only enabled him “to make close friendships with his intellectual opponents, but also helped his students to form themselves into a close-knit community of scholars for whom any natural competitiveness became a secondary matter.” Given the nature of graduate schools, Lindbeck observed, this outcome was close to miraculous.<sup>1</sup>

As to kindness, perhaps I may be allowed a personal reminiscence. When my father died during my second year of graduate studies at Yale, to my surprise Mr. Frei (as we all knew him) spontaneously offered to pay for an airplane ticket so that I could fly to California to be with my family.

1. Lindbeck, “Remarks at Frei’s Memorial Service.”

## Foreword

Although that turned out to be unnecessary, it was the kind of gesture one does not easily forget. Nor was it the last time that I (and many others) would be the object of such generosity. Many similar stories began to circulate after Frei's death.

John F. Woolverton, a close friend and former colleague, noted that if one read between the lines, one could discern in Frei a sense of Jesus's "haunting identity." What captivated him about Jesus, Woolverton suggested, was "his compassion, his severity, his ordinary kindness and natural gentleness, his simple, delighted generosity, and his profound humaneness."<sup>2</sup> Frei would recoil if anyone were to push the parallels too far, but I think it can fairly be stated that, "following at a distance" (to use one of his favored phrases for the Christian life), Frei himself displayed something of these same qualities. Certainly those who got to know him might soon realize that his kindness and compassion were not always unmixed with severity.

Although Frei spanned the fields of theology and history, he liked to quip that "to the historians I say that I'm a theologian while to the theologians I plead that I'm a historian." There was something ambivalent in Frei that did not like to be pinned down. Whether as a theologian or as a historian, there could be something tentative in all his explorations. He worried more about being too simple and clearly defined than about being too dense and obscure. His prose, notoriously teutonic and serpentine (though sometimes quite eloquent), seemed to embody this tendency. He admired Barth for his robust convictions without being able to share them completely. He could find something valuable in almost any theological position while still holding something back in reserve. He had a knack for explaining the theology of his teacher H. Richard Niebuhr with unmatched power and sympathy, but in a way that left Niebuhr seeming, ironically, somewhat diminished in the end. Immensely learned and cultured, Frei was a scholar whose sympathies were strong but whose sentiments were hesitant, and finally perhaps even a bit troubled.

Whether he was really the leading Anselmian theologian of his generation is a nice question. It would depend to some extent on whom we might regard as the contenders. If we restrict ourselves to Protestant theologians of his generation, the names of Jürgen Moltmann and Thomas F. Torrance come to mind. However, while Moltmann was clearly more Hegelian than Anselmian, and while Torrance was much more indebted to Cyril than to Anselm, both were clearly more productive as theologians by far than was

2. Woolverton, "Hans W. Frei in Context," 392.

Frei. It is the great merit of this new two-volume set of writings in hand that Frei's unpublished work—always interesting, provocative, and worthwhile—is being rescued from obscurity. Relative to the others, however, the overall bulk of Frei's theological writing still does not loom large. In any case, it seems that an Anselmian moment in one of Frei's arguments about Christ's resurrection, which is about all it comes to, would not really be enough to qualify him as a distinctively Anselmian theologian, an epithet that might more properly be applied to Balthasar or to Barth.

What Frei really cared about was the singularity of Jesus and, in particular, about the specific literary way that the gospel narratives (resembling modern "realistic" narratives) set it forth. He therefore cared also about modern depictions of Jesus by which that singularity was systematically obscured. These interests establish the common bond between Frei's theological and historical work.

As a theologian, he wanted to show how the gospels, taken as realistic narratives, depicted the identity of Jesus Christ as something irreducibly and unsubstutably his own. Jesus' narrated identity as the gospels set it forth, and as construed for centuries by the church prior to the seventeenth century, meant that he was not a symbol for anything other than himself. He was a singular human being whose particularity was essential to his universal saving significance. There was no universal significance for Jesus without his stubborn Jewish particularity, and no particularity not fraught with saving significance for the whole world. His universality, we might say, was not grounded in his religious self-consciousness or in his way of being in the world. It was grounded, rather, in his particularity as the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3 ESV). For Frei, in discerning the identity and significance of Jesus, the covenantal took precedence over anything merely general or anthropological.<sup>3</sup>

Frei's claim to fame as the foremost historian of biblical hermeneutics in his day undoubtedly carries weight. He attempted to excavate history in order to show how the gospels came to be systematically misread in modernity. Defenders and detractors of the Christian faith alike went equally astray, he argued, in confusing questions of meaning with those of truth in their interpretations of the gospel narratives. Meaning was made to be dependent on truth, or perceptions of the truth, rather than the other

3. For a critical assessment of Frei's argument, see Hunsinger, "Frei's Early Christology."

## Foreword

way around. As Frei demonstrated ingeniously and at great length, no one quite grasped that the narratives meant what they said about the identity of Jesus Christ regardless of whether or not one judged them to be true. The literary-theological function of the narratives in rendering the singular identity of Jesus in his universal significance and irreducible particularity was systematically overlooked all around. Frei's attempt to rescue the biblical narratives from their modern eclipse would receive wide acclaim even outside the disciplines of theology, capturing the favorable attention of luminaries like George Steiner, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Frank Kermode. The significance of his seminal work *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* is still being felt. As George Lindbeck wrote: "Frei's work marks the beginning of a change in biblical interpretation as decisive—though in a different direction—as that of Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus*."<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion let me mention four themes it might be helpful for readers of *Hans Frei, Reading Faithfully* to keep in mind as they proceed.

- A distinction between explanation and description, with a clear preference for the latter. If the identity of Jesus was as singular as the gospels claimed it to be, Frei believed, then no independent theoretical or explanatory schemes of interpretation could capture it. Such schemes could only be distorting and reductive. Descriptive hermeneutical strategies—the more formal and less theory-laden the better—were preferable.
- The use of nontheological modes of conceptual analysis to elucidate the logic and content of Christian dogmatic theology. Frei conscripted secular writers like Eric Auerbach (literature), Gilbert Ryle (analytical philosophy), and Clifford Geertz (cultural anthropology) precisely because they seemed serviceable in avoiding independent theoretical explanations in favor of a less-encumbered literary-theological description.
- A distrust of apologetical strategies because they seemed reductive of Jesus's radical singularity. "What I am proposing . . . is that we raise the question in a drastically non-apologetic, non-perspectivalist fashion: 'What does this narrative say or mean, never mind whether it can become a meaningful possibility of life perspective for us or not.' Its

4. Lindbeck, "Death Notices."

## Foreword

meaning on the one hand, and its possible as well as actual truth for us on the other, are two totally different questions.”<sup>5</sup>

- Finally, as already indicated, a granting of primacy to the particular over the general or universal, or better a construal of Jesus’s universal saving significance in terms of his unique and unsubstitutable identity depicted by means of “realistic narratives” in the gospels as historically construed by the church. Hermeneutical attempts to do the reverse, i.e. to move from the universal or the general to the narrative particularities, would be, in this case, Frei urged, “first to put the cart before the horse and then cut the lines and pretend the vehicle is self-propelled.”<sup>6</sup>

In short, the primacy of the descriptive, the particular, the non-apologetic, and the non-theoretical (in the particular senses I have indicated) were controlling themes that ran throughout virtually everything Frei undertook as a historian, a hermeneutician, and a theologian.

5. Frei, “Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal,” 40.

6. Frei, “The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative,” 148.