

Editorial Introduction

Hans Wilhelm Frei (1922–1988) is a very significant influence in contemporary theology, but that influence has little to do with the quantity of his publications. In his lifetime, he published nothing more than a handful of articles and book reviews, and two books: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in 1974 and *The Identity of Jesus Christ* in 1975. After his death, George Hunsinger and William Placher published *Types of Christian Theology* (1992), a collection of lectures from the last few years of Frei's life that he was hoping to turn into a book, and *Theology and Narrative* (1993), a collection of other essays and lectures from across his theological career, yet even when these volumes are taken into account the list of available materials is not long.

Writing did not come easily to Frei, and he knew it. He frequently apologized to editors for making them negotiate his “purple prose.” This was, perhaps, a byproduct of his capacity to see more broadly than most the tangled landscape of historical and theological issues within which modern theology sits. He was fascinated by the interconnected paths that crossed this landscape, and yet this fascination, and his strong desire to do justice to it and to share with others the joy of exploring it, did not always yield easily to the linearity of writing. The early pieces that we have collected here, especially, are dense and difficult, beset by qualifications and diversions. Yet at moments, even in those early pieces, his style does open up, and he found a clearer voice as the years went by.

Writing was difficult for him; publishing more so. In the archive of his papers in Yale Divinity School Library, alongside all the materials that were not intended for publication (letters, notes for lectures, and so on), there is a good deal of material that Frei hoped to publish but never managed to bring into a final form. Some of this is accidental, but it is also the case that he was not prone to either seek or desire the publishing or academic

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spotlight. It is clear from his letters that his great inclination was to share and debate ideas with students and friends in intimate settings. There are, nevertheless, in the archive of his writings in the Yale Divinity School library, a number of other items he hoped to have published some day, or that provide tantalizing hints of the publishing plans he had at the time of his sudden and premature passing. There are also a good few pieces by him to be found elsewhere: tape recordings of some lectures, pieces that have circulated among his students and friends without ever making it to the archive, and stray items buried in the archives of other institutions.

Frei's influence is widespread and deep, spreading through his many students and colleagues, and also through those, like the editors of these volumes, who have been indelibly shaped by engagement with his works but not his person. It is in the conviction that he remains a deeply fruitful theologian to think with, through, and after, and with a sense of intellectual indebtedness, that we have endeavored to offer to the patient reader a new collection of Frei's writing, including the more substantial and illuminating items from his archive, and several other out-of-print and difficult to obtain items.

These materials fill out the picture of Frei's work available to us. They show him (especially in our second volume) as an intellectual historian—an historian of theology and of religious sensibility—situating his own work against the background of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century theology in Europe and North America. They also show him (especially in our first volume) as a substantive theologian: clarifying and extending his arguments about the meaning and truth of scriptural narrative, distinguishing his project from other forms of narrative or story theology, exploring the kinds of political theology consistent with his typological imagination, and delving into pneumatology, ecclesiology, and a range of other doctrinal loci.

With some exceptions, identified in the accompanying introductory notes, these pieces were not found in a final, polished condition. We have therefore cleaned up slips in spelling and grammar, introduced consistent punctuation, completed references, changed a few pronouns for the sake of gender inclusivity, smoothed spoken hesitations into written sentences, and in one or two places (always identified in our notes) attempted to make sense of some passages where the original is difficult to make out. We have introduced notes (surrounded by square brackets) to give references that Frei omitted altogether, and to identify most of the figures he names.

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Beyond that, however, we have endeavored to leave Frei's voice as we find it. These pieces provide a set of windows into his ever acute and deepening thinking, and his generous and indefatigable engagement with the modern theological world.

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