Conclusion

The thrust of chapters five and six is clear enough: The Christian faith holds that certain beliefs, linguistically articulated as doctrinal statements, are universally, normatively, and continuously true, through varying generations and cultures. It claims that, in essentials, these beliefs are stable and selfsame, with a fundamentally perduring dimension throughout history. At the same time, these fundamental beliefs undergo change on two levels: (1) There are often changes in conceptual construct, that is, in the formulation or *Denkstil* in which a particular belief or judgment is rendered and conceptualized; and (2) there is also, often enough, the change of organic development, continuing the fundamental thrust of the original doctrine or idea but now extending and amplifying it in consonance with the original meaning.

In consequence of such claims, Christian theology needs a hermeneutical theory that is able to sustain these conjunctive elements—on the one hand perduring identity, on the other, a decided modicum of change and development. What is needed, then, is a hermeneutical theory able not only to take account of the enveloping horizons of historical embeddedness, of sociocultural delimitation, but one also able to explicate and display the material continuity and identity of the Christian faith throughout that history. What is needed is an interpretative theory corresponding to the insight of Pascal: A pluralism that cannot be integrated into unity is chaos; unity unrelated to plurality is tyranny.

One argument of these chapters has been that the hermeneutical via media proposed by Gadamer, which seeks to navigate between the Scylla of wooden repetition and the Charybdis of interpretative anarchism, can only be appropriated by Christian theology in a qualified manner. Of course, about certain elements in Gadamer's work theology should be entirely enthusiastic. With Heidegger, he has unmasked the "worldless subject," thereby centralizing Heidegger's attempt to exhume the *Lebenswelt* from the obsequies pronounced by a bloodless transcendental philosophy; he has convincingly argued that hermeneutical positivism, with its exaltation of subjective annihilation, is entirely untenable; he has shown that "the standpoint beyond any standpoint … is pure illusion"; he has overcome a naïve objectivism by indicating that any understanding must always already be interpretation, that is, a true *Horizontverschmelzung* takes place between interpreter and the interpreted; he has maintained the axial importance of tradition while superseding a stolid traditionalism forestalling growth and development; and he has shown that any "listening" is always already "appropriative listening," and that any seeing is already a "seeing as."

Nonetheless, the appropriation of Gadamer's thought by Christian theology must be qualified, in my judgment, because his approach is ultimately unable to provide theoretical support for the claim that revelation and doctrine represent a true *locutio Dei*, that is, a manifestation that is materially continuous and abidingly true from culture to culture, from generation to generation. At stake here is the need to defend revelation and doctrine as encompassing elements of *material*, and not simply formal and historical, continuity. The definitions of Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon, with their fundamental meanings intact, must be able to norm Christian belief today as clearly as in the early church. But in order to maintain the material continuity of the salvific, revelatory narrative, its normative identity in history, the integral transmission of Christian doctrine requires, for the sake of its logical explication, the possibility of reconstructive understanding. Gadamer's theory, relying ultimately on Heidegger's

"fundamental ontology," has rejected realistic hermeneutics out of hand, holding that this approach is both ontologically and hermeneutically truncated.

Theologically, then, if one takes an unqualified Gadamerian hermeneutics as one's philosophical koiné, with historicity and finitude as first principles, one is left defending interpretations that may differ widely from age to age, from culture to culture, from epoch to epoch. Of course, Gadamer tries to stem the tide against interpretative relativism with what Caputo has called his "Hegelian ontologization of history" as well as with his notion of the enduring "claim." It is difficult to see, however, how the formal unity of history, absent the material unity of content, allows this hermeneutical approach to sustain the self-understanding of historic Christian faith. In my judgment, the hermeneutical work of Emilio Betti provides an alternative interpretative theory which, like that of Gadamer, seeks to establish a via media between leaden repetition and interpretative anarchy, but does so in a way that is able to preserve recognitive and reproductive interpretation and, in so doing, is better able to explicate theoretically the material continuity of Christian faith and doctrine.

Betti, like Gadamer, wishes to take account of the ontological productivity of history and of the indisputable centrality of temporality and social location, but in such a way that recognitive interpretation is not thereby excised. Betti's thought allows for, indeed demands, reconceptualization while at the same time protecting the autonomy of the original text/Form. Consequently, his thought is able to support a subtle understanding of the context/content hermeneutical trajectory, whereby the teachings of the church may be differently and creatively re-expressed while maintaining a stable identity throughout history and culture. This approach allows Christian theologians to argue for unity within historicity, for identity within cultural difference. It allows for change and development because it calls for the importance, indeed necessity, of reconceptualization while concomitantly maintaining the fundamental stability of the dialogical narrative between God and humanity called revelation. It endorses and encourages continuing ecumenical dialogue because it recognizes that differing perspectives and formulations of Christian faith need not preclude a more fundamental unity. It strikes the proper balance between historicity and identity without "dehistoricizing" hermeneutics (as would those seeking to maintain only conceptual monism) and without entirely "historicizing" them (as would those arguing that any "stable" content is philosophically untenable). In both cases, the context/content distinction is opposed, but for very different reasons. One option has difficulty explaining historicity, the other with explaining identity.

One can understand the concerns of the conceptual monists. A certain terminology has been used for centuries, and it is very easy to think that a lexicon purified in the fire of controversy and honed by centuries of theological thought is irreplaceable. But historicity requires an idea to be presented anew, in a different conceptual and lexical/semantic context, if it is to be once again intelligible.

One can also understand the plaints of the Gadamerian-influenced theoreticians. They wish to emphasize, properly, all of the sociocultural and linguistic horizons within which "presence" comes to light. They wish to show, appropriately, that all understanding is already, in some sense, interpretation. Further, we can say that the "overcoming of metaphysics" that Gadamer adopts from Heidegger is entirely correct if by this we mean a baroque, encrusted ontotheology that reduces the God of mystery to what Heidegger calls calcified, *Vorhandenheit* thinking, the *causa sui* before whom one cannot dance or sing, or to what Jean-Luc Marion condemns as the reifying, conceptually idolatrous imagination. This overcoming of metaphysics is also entirely correct if metaphysics is here understood as an imperialistic

discipline placing revelation and theology in an illegitimate Procrustean bed, failing to recognize the absolute epistemic primacy of the revelatory narrative for a Christian understanding of both being and God.

These aberrations, however, are not the performative, theologically disciplined metaphysics that is the best of the Christian tradition. And it is just this disciplined metaphysics that resists a profoundly historicized construal of thought and being ultimately issuing in a fluidity of textual meaning, despite the other strategies Gadamer has proposed, and so a fluidity in doctrinal statements that, in my judgment, strays beyond the acceptable development and organic growth characteristic of the tradition.

Revelation is about the *Deus Revelatus*, the God who has entered into a dialogue with his creatures and manifested to us something of his inner Trinitarian life. This "unveiling" persists, continuously and normatively, in the Christian church. It is for this reason that some construal of reality explaining this continuous presence, this perduring revelation, has led theology to use some kind of metaphysics (understood in a commodious sense), and thereby some particular kind of hermeneutics, to aid in theological explications of faith. This metaphysics exists, it must always be emphasized, not as theology's lord but as theology's servant, as its *ancilla*, given the epistemic primacy of God's revealing love. One should not think that metaphysics endures simply because Christianity quickly took root in a Hellenistic culture; it is surely only an illegitimate Harnackian bias that sustains this claim. On the contrary, a certain kind of rationality and first philosophy has endured because it has helped to illuminate the continuous and perduring, if inexhaustible, presence characteristic of Christian faith and thought.

Robert Jenson is correct when he says that when hermeneutics becomes universal, it thereby becomes metaphysics. The point here is that Christian faith and doctrine needs the kind of hermeneutics, and so the kind of metaphysics, that can support abiding presence, that can support the normative and universal truth characteristic of certain Christian beliefs and affirmations. Such a claim does not constitute resistance to history, which would be a futile and worthless undertaking in any case. It does constitute, rather, a clear recognition that truth, in its abiding nature, may be grasped within history—and that such grasping says something about the very nature of humanity. In my judgment, Betti's hermeneutical position, while not without its own imperfections, provides, more clearly than does Gadamer's, the theoretical support that Christian affirmations need.

The theme of chapters three and four was that Christian theology needs a certain notion of truth that can logically explicate and sustain its perduring and normative claims. I have argued in chapters five and six that a hermeneutical theory sustaining such claims is similarly needed. In chapters seven and eight, I shall examine the kind of language needed to explicate properly and appositely Christian faith and doctrine.

CHAPTER 7