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The theological methodology of Carl F. H. Henry

Ph.D. Dissertation
Summary

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Keywords: philosophy, theology, argumentation, logic, presuppositions, faith, method, reason, a priori, a posteriori, coherence, consistency, epistemology

Synthesis of the main parts of the work

The present work analyses the theological methodology of the most famous and specialized protestant evangelical theologian from the United States of America of the XXth century, Carl F. H. Henry. The American theologian is without doubt, literally unknown outside the Evangelical circles from Romania and belonged to what we generally call the *conservative* position of Evangelical Protestantism, namely those that have kept the traditional Christian theological legacy, comprised in its essence by the confessions of faith of the first four ecumenical councils and also the particularities of orthodox Protestant theology, that is before liberal Protestantism. Henry was thus the most important representative of Evangelical Protestantism from the second half of the twentieth century that bestowed upon it a new academic level and, generally speaking, one of the most important American theologians from the last century, recognized as such even during his lifetime.

The theologian offers an extraordinary example of theological commitment led by the assuming of the Christian faith without compromise and, at the same time an example of interaction with the issues of the human being in present times. We think that at least Henry's *magnum opus*, *God, Revelation and Authority*, by its complexity and deepness of thought and analysis as well as the unusual amount of topics and authors tackled with, exceeds the confessional limits of Evangelical Protestantism, proved by the fact that the work received favourable criticism and positive appraisals from several Romano-Catholic theologians and writers.

At the same time – and this needs a special emphasis – the Evangelical theologian offers a model of a theology that is strongly underlain philosophically and rationally. The theologian is very confident when he tackles complex philosophical issues and this familiarity needs to be especially stressed together with the rigour used to handle

philosophical and logical concepts. But Henry offers more than a model for theological discourse, philosophically-based, he also a model for the integration of philosophy and theology in a unitary undertaking.

In his writings the theologian shows that he strongly believes that philosophy and theology are active on the same ground, and one shouldn't draw any artificial demarcation between them, that theology cannot do without philosophy (and vice versa) and all our interpretations of reality are based on philosophical or metaphysical beliefs and presuppositions.

From this point of view, this dissertation – that lies between philosophy and religion – is a proof of the fruitful cooperation between the conceptual inventory of philosophy and the content of Christian theology and represents a theological investigation which is done by using the specific tools of philosophy.

Carl Henry was an absolute advocate of the rational and logical argumentation of the content of the Christian faith. He rejected any fideistic evasion from the demands of logical foundation, this being the reason of the positive criticism mentioned above. However, we cannot but agree that to believe in God is one thing (that has to do with the inner being of a person) and to present this faith into a logically incoherent discourse is totally different.

This is why the American theologian particularly stressed the methodological elucidation of the theological endeavour. The importance Henry bestowed on the theological method is one of the reasons why he is presently neglected in Protestant circles that renounced the method, evident only at the level of pretending to overcome modernist establishments. For Henry, only the logical establishment and epistemological consistency can bestow on theology – that has become a kind of Cinderella of academic subjects – the respect and academic dignity.

One of the reasons why Henry was not properly understood is because of the superficiality towards the way in which his deductive method (which is not fashionable among contemporary theologians) is intertwined with material and dogmatic aspects of theology in a robust and coherent system, so that to dissociate an element out of this – the

way it happened with the role of reason in theology, discussed in the dissertation, or the propositional character of revelation – makes the whole system shake. Therefore, we tried to prove the coherence of Henry’s theological thought “dismantling” the system in its essential “pieces”.

Henry was very little studied in his methodology, in the sense that there are no full dissertations dedicated entirely to this subject. As far as we know, up to present times there is only one PhD thesis that discusses the methodology of Henry, although from a different, more general perspective, to which unfortunately we did not have access. We are talking about Richard A. Purdy’s dissertation, *The Rational Apologetic Methodology of Carl F. H. Henry in the Context of the Current Impasse between Reformed and Evangelical Apologetics*, defend at New York University in 1980. It should be noted that this dissertation appeared before the publication of the whole work, *God, Revelation and Authority* that spanned over a period of several years, between 1978 and 1984.

Three more punctual observations before we move to the general synthesis of the content of the dissertation. First, this work analyses the methodology of Henry based on his fundamental work, *God, Revelation and Authority*, that constitutes enough material (3000 pages) for a food evaluation of the theologian in terms of his methodology.

Secondly, in terms of the form of the presentations, we chose to analyze the critics of Henry and discuss, evaluate and integrate in a larger theological context his methodological propositions, at a formal or material level, in the body of the chapters dedicated to the subject, not in a separate part. In this way the “cold” investigation of his work is intertwined naturally with the personal position.

Finally with respect to the references used, it must be said that these are in their majority, Protestant, considering on one hand that Henry’s priority target was Modern Protestant theology, and on the other hand that a more general theological integration of Henry would have surpassed the limits of this dissertation.

After this general view of the subject of our investigation, together with the appropriate observations, we proceed to the short presentation of the main parts. The paper is divided into six chapters.

The first section of the work deals with general aspects of theological methodology, from the need of a recovery of methodological thinking in theology and philosophy, moving to fundamental aspects of theological methodology and showing the uniqueness of the theological method with regards to other methodological determinations. We tried to proceed in such a way that all the elements discussed (the role of faith and presuppositions in theology, the theological method and science, the inductive and deductive achievement of theological truth and many more) are clearly understood for the part dedicated to Henry's methodology.

Chapter two has a twofold purpose. First, it gives a general presentation of Henry, certain fundamental biographical remarks and, more importantly, the way he is presently perceived, both positively and negatively. In the first part of the chapter we emphasized four main aspects that contemporary theology is facing, all of the relevant for Henry's thought and for his evaluation in present times. Henceforth we tried to create a more general perspective for a theological integration of Henry and for an introduction into his theology. The four topics discussed are: *The Church, globalization and religious pluralism, the Role of Scripture in theological discourse, Theology and revelation, Theology and science.*

The second part of this chapter deals with a schematic description of some philosophical and theological figures that are defining for the direction of Protestant theology in the XXth century, that Henry always kept in sight: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Henry's theology was in permanent contact with these thinkers whom he considered decisive for the direction adopted by Protestant religion for the last two centuries.

Bearing in mind that Henry's theology is unknown in Romanian Christian circles, we thought it was necessary make a presentation of his thought in view of textual conditioning (national, theological-confessional) that decisively fuel the theological method, and then continue to a more detailed presentation of the main problems that the theologian detected in Protestant theology as well as the answer offered to these challenges. These things were done in chapter three, and are particularly important as

they lay the theoretical basis needed for a better understanding of his theological method. We looked at Henry through the lenses of a preliminary conditioning of his methodology, contextually and confessionally determined. From this point of view the North-American context, the Reformed legacy and Baptist confession leave their mark on his theological method. On the other hand we emphasized the apologetic nature of Henry's theological endeavour that structured his whole activity.

When we referred to the theological and contemporary Protestant state, we showed the way in which Henry distinguished the main stages of the development of theological-philosophical thought as parting from the Judeo-Christian revelation. After he offered a diagnosis of modern Protestant theology, Henry identified the major issue of Protestantism in the flawed concept of God, a concept that came -- by means of several reconstructions -- to keep almost no reference to the objective supernatural.

Chapter four introduces the most consistent part of the dissertation, and analyses first some preliminary aspects of Henry's methodology, with a presentation of the role of theological methodology in Henry's argumentation, its limits, conditioning and determinations, the influence of faith in theological knowledge, as well as a configuration of the theological method with regards to science and philosophy. Our analysis shows that there is a unitary vision of human thought in Henry's view, in which theology, philosophy and science are intertwined in a common framework of reason.

Chapter five constitutes the essence of this dissertation as it explains the method of rational presuppositionalism of Henry in all fundamental data. The American theologian builds his system deductively, according to three fundamental presuppositions: the ontological presupposition: the Triune God; the epistemological presupposition: the divine revelation; and the logical presuppositions: consistency and coherence.

On the other hand, this chapter develops the most important material aspects of Henry's theology as well as the most disputed: the propositional nature of revelation, revelation in the Scripture, the role of reason in theology. The end of the chapter is devoted to interpretation aspects of the Scripture in Henry and the way he evaluates the historical-critical method in view of his presuppositions.

Chapter six is also crucial and gets to the heart of the matter of this work, as it analyses – after general introduction to religious epistemology – Carl Henry’s epistemology that fuels his theological method. We will follow the way in which epistemology and methodology complement and condition each other, or in other words, the way in which formal and material aspects are intertwined in the configuration of Henry’s theological system.

The end of the dissertation discusses some general conclusions and also some recommendations with respect to Henry’s methodology in the context of contemporary Protestantism that faces a deep theological identity crisis.

First, with regards to Henry’s methodology, we need to mention that, at a formal level, his methodology doesn’t have tensions or sensitive areas, as it completes a unitary whole very consistent and internally coherent. Henry is consistent to his theological presuppositions and, following the logical principles of consistency and coherence, establishes a model of consistent and robust discourse both formal and material. We saw the way in which epistemology influences his method the latter in turns consistently structuring epistemological applications to other theological issues.

A very solid articulation asks a holistic treatment of the system. The error and injustice of many critics of Henry’s theology are based precisely on a fragmentary and segmental analysis that detaches from the system certain aspects out of context. The most significant examples – that were analyses in detail – are the role of reason in theology and the propositional nature of revelation. These are taken out context and analysed independent of his theological presuppositions, on one hand, and of his logical method of derivation, on the other, which lead to unjustified conclusions in the light of his whole discourse. Talking about the above examples, Henry becomes an incurable rationalist in his approaching to the subject, even a late product of theological Illuminism. We trust that, in the present work we provided sufficient evidence to show the inconsistencies of such interpretations.

However, we have to admit that such a system that tends to be perfect may show signs of hermetism towards other systems, of rigidity in the broader context of theology, and

the binary communication is burdened by reducing the options. Presuppositionalism can easily turn into „biblicism” and the argumentation may be sententious or dogmatic. This was the case in the North-American context, by the self isolation of fundamentalist Protestants and their divorce with any social or cultural engagements. As we have shown at the beginning of the paper, Carl Henry vehemently reacted to this position. At the same time, he remained principal and consistent to the end of his life and Henry laid his own system in a context of permanent dialog with other confessional traditions. This was reflected even in his professional career as a *lecturer-at-large*, which allowed him to initiate a permanent theological communication. An example was the way in which Henry refused to consider Scripture’s inerrancy as a test of authentic evangelical doctrine, affirming, as we have seen, as a test of the consistency of this doctrine; this made some of the most important representatives of American Evangelicalism stop working with Henry.

Of course, it is still debatable whether or not his deductive method can be adopted in theology today. It is sure that its advantages, we think, are more numerous than its possible flaws. The theological method of Henry offers a standard an dogmatic criterium solid in a time of profuse doctrinal confusion. When the method is well augmented and supported philosophically, and logically grounded, this method is hard to reject on a formal level.

The theologian remains an example of steadiness in a time of vast and often radical religious and cultural transformations that proves by logical, philosophical and theological arguments that the dogmatic legacy of classical Christianity can be prolonged even today in a viable way. Henry engages in a continuous dialog, serious and well informed with the philosophical and theological problems and interrogations from the XXth century, but he refuses to do it by adjusting his reasoning to the philosophical categories of modern relativism or theological radicalism. The answers offered from a position that might look like rigid dogmatism ar in fact solidly motivated philosophically and rationally. Henry shows that classical Christian theism hasn’t yet exhausted its resources of interpretation of reality and it is still a good example worth following in the unitary way in which it interacted with the specialised literature.

His philosophical and epistemological eclecticism that is to a certain extent characteristic of Protestant theology, proves useful because it refuses to subdue theology to a given philosophical system, a fatal mistake for dogmatic theology, fully confirmed by history. In fact, most of Henry's critics that accuse him of transforming theology and Scripture into prisoners of Illuminist or modernist thought did nothing but change their master, by subduing theology to the contemporary categories of philosophical discourse. On the other hand, Henry's method shows that the internal nature of Christian revelation implies particular philosophical and conceptual instruments that should satisfy the needs of logical foundations in communicating the Christian faith and avoid the immediate succumb or intake of certain philosophical or scientific contemporary options, bypassing the ephemeral feature of any scientific theory or philosophical speculation. From this point of view, Henry's firm belief in an absolute objective truth offers philosophical and theological perspectives that give hope in dealing with human fragility and fallibility of all interpretative options more than does the negation of reaching this objective truth. Christianity falls or stands up based on an objective foundation without which, theology would be, as Carl Raschke said, a peculiar form of literary criticism.

The emphasis laid by Henry on presuppositions in the theological method and the negation of a real "pure" knowledge objective and unbiased by certain presumptions is maybe surprisingly, in harmony with Postmodern epistemological and hermeneutical standards. From this point of view, Henry can join Postmodern thought, the one that denounced epistemological rigidity from the modern discourse and a biased limitation of a reality in the name of certain canons of a very narrow reason, but, unlike other Postmodernists, the American theologian argues in favour of an objective knowledge and the reality of absolute transcultural truths.

The importance given to methodological clarification, rational and logical foundation of the theological discourse is, again, perfectly legitimate in the present context of communication theory that emphasises the need of a valid legitimization of any discourse. Henry's bestows dignity upon theology, while the Protestant irrational tendencies continue to sink theology in a rather literary discourse, metaphorical and

attractive at the level of formulation, but logically unreasonable and inwardly incoherent. Protestant theologians need not use the concept of “mystery” as a magic wand that should be at hand when they need to publicly their discourse.

Protestant theology – and especially American evangelical theology – needs to regain its seriousness and a rigorous conceptual thought, something that cannot be achieved except by making clear the logical-philosophical tools and by regaining logical thinking, rational argument. As a writer quoted in the dissertation said, a logical contradiction is not a mystery, it is an absurdity. Theology shouldn't bypass public reason and logical criteria for validation, hiding behind the phrase “God is incomprehensible” or other concepts that cover nothing but the epistemological gap and the lack of rational foundation. God is not just a mystery, He is reason at the same time, and faith and reasoning cannot be separated without leading to a kind of intellectual schizophrenia.

Henry's methodology offers at the same time a model for an integrating discourse of theology and philosophy and shows the way in which the two subjects should work together and purify one another. Henry reminds us in his writing about what Cardinal Ratzinger, the present Benedict XVIth stated in the debate with Habermas from 2004 with regards to the need of bringing to a dialogue both reason and religion, of laying them in the normal limits of complementarity. Reason and faith are partners in a unitary vision of world and life. Philosophy shouldn't give up theology, considering that it is inferior, and theology should take philosophical investigation seriously because, as Henry proved, the two of them are active on the same ground. Theology cannot support itself, without philosophy and this in turns should draw its fuel from the resources and solutions offered by theology. Despite the fact that Metaphysics or the traditional ontological paradigm of philosophy became ephemeral in our times, theology cannot hold a consistent and viable view of reality without ontological grounding and objectiveness.

Finally, Henry's work, built in a time of theological crisis, shows in particular how deep the problems of Protestantism in particular, and of Christianity in general. Henry's work particularly begs for the note that one of the most urgent needs that Protestantism has in present is to solve the doctrine of the Scripture. In fact, the long history of theology

proves that the most serious theological battles were fought around the purpose and place of Scripture. As Henry reminds us, within each age of the Church, the fate of Scripture decided the fate of Christianity. This is where Christianity stands or fails, because the aspects that are drawn from here have practical and dogmatic important consequences and the fate of theology depends on the verdict given regarding Scripture: the major doctrines of Christianity depend for their validation, on Scripture's truth.

This is why the questions regarding Scripture as revelation remain actual. Without a coherent vision in this respect, Protestantism is in danger of demolishing its own foundation and doctrinal criterion as it is shown, in its essence as *sola Scriptura*, and fails to provide a stable doctrinal standard. Henry stated that "an unsatisfactory vision of the Scripture will soon collapse on its own; if we cannot trust the Gospels and Epistles to tell the truth, we can only say a little or nothing about the Jesus Christ they represent." There is no sound epistemologically consistent possibility of building a real portrait of Jesus Christ based on a fallible text.

In a full crisis of integrated frames and metanarratives, the theology of Carl Henry is a proof that the possibility of a comprehensive vision of reality and existence which accounts for man in the integrity of his spiritual, moral and intellectual experience still exists, and in the middle of debates about globalization and religious pluralism, the concept of *imago Dei*, crucial in Henry's theology offers a solid basis for the interaction between people of different religious denominations.

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