

• Theology and Experience

Reflections on Cognitive and Experiential Approaches to Theology

• *La théologie et l'expérience*

• *Theologie und Erfahrung*

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SUMMARY

The article deals with the manner in which the cognitive and experiential aspects of Christian theology relate to one another. It is shown that theology provides an interpretative framework by which human experience may be addressed, interpreted and transformed. The relation between theology and experience is explored

with particular reference to the writings of Martin Luther and C. S. Lewis. It is shown how Christianity may be related to experience without recourse to the discredited liberal appeal to 'general human experience' or compromising the total grounding of theology in the self-revelation of God in Scripture.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur traite des rapports entre l'aspect cognitif et l'expérience dans la théologie chrétienne. Il soutient que la théologie fournit un cadre interprétatif qui permet de considérer, d'interpréter et de transformer l'expérience humaine. Il examine cette relation en s'appuyant principalement sur les écrits de Martin Luther et de C. S. Lewis. Il montre

comment le christianisme a trait à l'expérience sans qu'il soit besoin de faire appel à la notion libérale discréditée de 'l'expérience humaine générale', et sans compromettre le principe selon lequel toute théologie doit se fonder uniquement sur la révélation que Dieu nous a donnée de lui-même dans l'Écriture.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit dem Verhältnis zwischen dem kognitiven und dem erfahrungsmäßigen Aspekt christlicher Theologie. Es wird gezeigt, daß Theologie einen Rahmen bietet, mit Hilfe dessen die menschliche Erfahrung angegangen, interpretiert und verwandelt werden kann. Das Verhältnis von Theologie und Erfahrung wird unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Werke von Martin Luther und C. S. Lewis untersucht. Es

wird gezeigt, wie ein Bezug zwischen dem Christentum und der Erfahrung hergestellt werden kann ohne entweder auf die diskreditierte liberale Berufung auf die 'allgemeine menschliche Erfahrung' zurückzugreifen oder die ausschließliche Gründung der Theologie in der Selbstoffenbarung Gottes in der Schrift zu kompromittieren.

Experience' is an imprecise term. The origins of the English word are relatively well understood: it derives from the Latin term *experientia*, which could be interpreted as 'that which arises out of travelling

through life (*ex-perientia*)'. In this broad sense, it means 'an accumulated body of knowledge, arising through first-hand encounter with life'. When one speaks of 'an experienced teacher' or 'an experienced

doctor', the implication is that the teacher or doctor has learned her craft through first-hand application. Yet the term has developed an acquired meaning, which particularly concerns us here. It has come to refer to the inner life of individuals, in which those individuals become aware of their own subjective feelings and emotions.¹ It relates to the inward and subjective world of experience, as opposed to the outward world of everyday life. A series of writings, including William James's celebrated study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), have stressed the importance of the subjective aspects of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Christianity is not simply about ideas; it is about the interpretation and transformation of the inner life of the individual. This concern with human experience is particularly associated with the movement generally known as existentialism, which has sought to restore an awareness of the importance of the inner life of individuals to both theology and philosophy.²

Two main approaches may be discerned within Christian theology to the question of the relation of experience to theology:

1. Experience provides a foundational resource for Christian theology.
2. Christian theology provides an interpretative framework by which human experience may be interpreted.

The first approach has been of major importance within recent liberal theological approaches; the second is especially associated with evangelical orthodoxy, and will be explored in the present article. We begin, however, by considering the first position.

The idea that human religious experience can act as a foundational resource for Christian theology has obvious attractions. It suggests that Christian theology is concerned with human experience—something which is common to all humanity, rather than the exclusive preserve of a small group. To those who are embarrassed by the 'scandal of particularity' the approach has many merits. It suggests that all the world religions are basically human responses to the same religious experience—often referred to as 'a core experience of the transcendent'.

Theology is thus the Christian attempt to reflect upon this common human experience, in the knowledge that the same experience underlies the other world religions. We shall return to this point later in dealing with the question of the relation of Christianity to the other religions.

This approach also has considerable attractions for Christian apologetics, as the writings of many recent American theologians, especially Paul Tillich and David Tracy, make clear. In that humans share a common experience, whether they choose to regard it as 'religious' or not, Christian theology can address this common experience. The problem of agreeing upon a common starting point is thus avoided; the starting point is already provided, in human experience. Apologetics can demonstrate that the Christian gospel makes sense of common human experience. This approach is probably seen at its best in Paul Tillich's sermons *The Courage to Be*, which attracted considerable attention after their publication in 1952. It seemed to many observers that Tillich had succeeded in correlating the Christian proclamation with common human experience.³

But there are difficulties here. The most obvious is that there is actually very little empirical evidence for a 'common core experience' throughout human history and culture. The idea is easily postulated, and virtually impossible to verify. This approach has found its most mature and sophisticated expression in the 'Experiential-Expressive Theory of Doctrine', to use a term employed by the distinguished Yale theologian George Lindbeck. In his volume *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), Lindbeck provides an important analysis of the nature of Christian doctrine.⁴ One of the many merits of this book is the debate which it has initiated over this unjustly neglected aspect of Christian theology, which has assumed new importance recently on account of the impact of the ecumenical movement.

Lindbeck suggests that theories of doctrine may be divided into three general types. The cognitive-propositionalist theory lays stress upon the cognitive aspects of religion, emphasizing the manner in which doctrines function as truth claims or informative propositions. The experiential-

expressive theory interprets doctrines as non-cognitive symbols of inner human feelings or attitudes. A third possibility, which Lindbeck himself favours, is the cultural-linguistic approach to religion. Lindbeck associates this model with a 'rule' or 'regulative' theory of doctrine. It is Lindbeck's criticism of the second such theory which is of particular interest to us at this point.

The 'experiential-expressive' theory, according to Lindbeck, sees religions, including Christianity, as public, culturally conditioned manifestations and affirmations of pre-linguistic forms of consciousness, attitudes and feelings. In other words, there is some common universal 'religious experience', which Christian theology (in common with other religions) attempts to express in words. The experience comes first; the theology comes in later. As Lindbeck argues, the attraction of this approach to doctrine is grounded in a number of features of late twentieth-century western thought. For example, the contemporary preoccupation with inter-religious dialogue is considerably assisted by the suggestion that the various religions are diverse expressions of a common core experience, such as an 'isolable core of encounter' or an 'unmediated awareness of the transcendent'.

The principal objection to this theory, thus stated, is its resistance to verification. As Lindbeck points out, 'religious experience' is a hopelessly vague idea. 'It is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous.' The assertion that 'the various religions are diverse symbolizations of one and the same core experience of the Ultimate' is ultimately an unverifiable hypothesis, not least on account of the difficulty of locating and describing the 'core experience' concerned. As Lindbeck rightly points out, this would appear to suggest that there is 'at least the logical possibility that a Buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently'. The theory can only be credible if it is possible to isolate a common core experience from religious language and behaviour, and demonstrate that the latter

two are articulations of or responses to the former.

For such reasons, the second approach outlined above to the understanding of the relation between experience and theology has regained a hearing. According to this approach, Christian theology provides a framework by which the ambiguities of experience may be interpreted. Theology aims to interpret experience. It is like a net which we can cast over experience, in order to capture its meaning. Experience is seen as something which is to be interpreted, rather than something which is itself capable of interpreting. Christian theology thus aims to *address, interpret and transform* human experience. In what follows, I propose to explore these themes with particular reference to the writings of Martin Luther and Clive Stapleton (Jack) Lewis, best known to his many readers as 'C. S. Lewis'. European theology, with its long tradition of wrestling with experience within a cognitive framework, has an important contribution to make to this global discussion, of especial relevance in an experience-centered age.⁵

1. Theology addresses experience

Christian theology cannot remain faithful to its subject matter if it regards itself as purely propositional or cognitive in nature. The Christian encounter with God is transformative. As Calvin pointed out, to know God is to be changed by God; true knowledge of God leads to worship, as the believer is caught up in a transforming and renewing encounter with the living God. To know God is to be changed by God.⁶ As Søren Kierkegaard pointed out in his *Unscientific Postscript*, to know the truth is to be known by the truth. 'Truth' is something which affects our inner being, as we become involved in 'an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness'.⁷

This is in no sense to deny or to de-emphasize the cognitive aspects of Christian theology. It is merely to observe that there is more to theology than cerebralized information. A theology which touches the mind, leaving the heart unaffected, is no true Christian theology—a point stressed by both Luther and Calvin. Although Luther

is critical of the role of experience in spirituality, he does not dismiss it as an irrelevance. Indeed, Luther insists that there is one experience which is basic to being a theologian. He describes this briefly in one of his most quoted (and most difficult!) statements. 'It is living, dying, and even being condemned which makes a theologian—not reading, speculating and understanding'.⁸ When I first read these words of Luther, I found them baffling. Surely theology was about reading scripture, and trying to make sense of it? What was Luther complaining about? Now I know, and I am convinced that Luther is right. To be a *real* theologian is to wrestle with none other than the living God—not with ideas about God, but with God himself. And how can a sinner ever hope to deal adequately with this God?

If you want to be a real theologian, Luther insists, you must have experienced a sense of condemnation. You must have had a moment of insight, in which you realize just how sinful you really are, and how much you merit the condemnation of God. Christ's death on the cross spells out the full extent of God's wrath against sin, and shows us up as ones who are condemned. It is only from this point that we can fully appreciate the central theme of the New Testament—how God was able to deliver sinners from their fate. Without a full awareness of our sin, and the dreadful gulf this opens up between ourselves and God, we cannot appreciate the joy and wonder of the proclamation of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. In a letter to his colleague Philip Melanchthon, dated 13 January 1522, Luther suggested that he ask the so-called 'prophets' who were then confusing the faithful at Wittenberg the following question: 'have they experienced spiritual distress and the divine birth, death and hell?' A list of spiritual sensations is no substitute for the terror that accompanies a real encounter with the living God. For these modern prophets, Luther wrote, 'the sign of the Son of man is missing'.

A modern illustration might make this point. In his book *The Restoring Word*, J. Randall Nichols wrote of an experience he had while visiting the Greek island of Corfu. 'Some of the most beautiful music I ever heard was the chanting of Greek peasant

women, tears streaming down their lined and hardened faces, in a church on Corfu one Good Friday. I asked someone why they were weeping. "Because", he said, "their Christ is dead." I have often thought that I will never understand what resurrection means until I can weep like that.' Nichols' point, so memorably made, is that we can never appreciate the joy and hope of the resurrection, unless we have been plunged into the sense of hopelessness and helplessness which pervaded that first Good Friday. What is true of the resurrection is also true of forgiveness. Christian spirituality is grounded in an awareness of being a condemned sinner—an experience which is utterly transformed by divine forgiveness. We can never understand what forgiveness really means until we have wept the tears of condemnation.

Just about anyone can read the New Testament, and make some sort of sense of it. But, Luther insists, the *real* theologian is someone who has experienced a sense of condemnation on account of sin—who reads the New Testament, and realizes that the message of forgiveness is good news for him or her. The gospel is thus experienced as something liberating, something which transforms our situation, something which is relevant to us. It is very easy to read the New Testament as if it were nothing more than any other piece of literature. And Luther reminds us that it is only through being aware of our sin, and all its implications, that we can fully appreciate the wonder of the electrifying declaration that God has forgiven our sins through Jesus Christ.

2. Theology interprets experience

It is a consequence of the Christian doctrine of creation that we are made in the image of God. There is an inbuilt capacity—indeed, we might say, an inbuilt *need*—to relate to God. To fail to relate to God is to fail to be completely human. To be fulfilled is to be filled by God. Nothing that is transitory can ever fill this need. Nothing that is not itself God can ever hope to take the place of God. And yet, on account of the fallenness of human nature, there is now a natural ten-

dency to try to make other things fulfil this need.

Sin moves us away from God, and tempts us to place other things in his place. Created things thus come to be substituted for God. And they do not satisfy. And like the child who experiences and expresses dissatisfaction when the square peg fails to fit the round hole, so we experience a sense of dissatisfaction. Somehow, we are left with a feeling of longing—longing for *something* undefinable, of which human nature knows nothing, save that it does not possess it.

This phenomenon has been recognized since the dawn of human civilization. In one of his dialogues,⁹ Plato compares human beings to leaky jars. Somehow, we are always unfulfilled. We may pour things into the containers of our lives, but something prevents them from ever being entirely filled. We are always partly empty—and for that reason, experience a profound awareness of a lack of fullness and happiness. 'Those who have endured the void know that they have encountered a distinctive hunger, or emptiness; nothing earthly satisfies it' (Diogenes Allen).¹⁰ This well-documented feeling of dissatisfaction is one of the most important points of contact for the gospel proclamation. In the first place, that proclamation interprets this vague and unshaped feeling as a longing for *God*. It gives cognitive substance and shape to what would otherwise be an amorphous and unidentified subjective intuition. And in the second, it offers to fulfil it. There is a sense of divine dissatisfaction—not dissatisfaction *with* God, but a dissatisfaction with all that is not God, which arises from God, and which ultimately leads to God. Sartre is right: the world cannot bring fulfilment. Here he echoes the Christian view, which goes on to affirm that here, in the midst of the world, something which is ultimately beyond the world makes itself available to us. We do not need to wait for eternity to experience God; that experience can begin, however imperfectly, now. Perhaps the greatest statement of this feeling, and its most exquisite theological interpretation, may be found in the famous words of Augustine of Hippo: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you'.¹¹

Throughout Augustine's reflections, especially in the *Confessions*, the same theme recurs. We are doomed to remain incomplete in our present existence. Our hopes and deepest longings will remain nothing but hopes and longings. The resolution of this bitter-sweet tension remains real, even for the Christian, who becomes increasingly aware of the wonder of God, and of the inadequacy of our present grasp of that wonder. There is a sense of postponement, of longing, of wistful yearning, of groaning under the strain of having to tolerate the present, when the future offers so much.¹² The grand themes of creation and redemption there find a creative reworking which deserves careful attention. Because we are created by God in his image, we desire him; because we are sinful, we cannot satisfy that desire ourselves—either by substituting something for God, or by trying to coerce him to come to us. And so a real sense of frustration, of dissatisfaction, develops. And that dissatisfaction—but not its theological interpretation—is part of common human experience. Perhaps the finest statement of this exquisite agony is found in Augustine's cry that he 'is groaning with inexpressible groanings on my wanderer's path, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart lifted up towards it—Jerusalem my home land, Jerusalem my mother'.¹³ We are exiled from our homeland—but its memories return hauntingly.

Augustine finds one of his finest recent apologetic interpreters in the writings of the Oxford literary critic and theologian C. S. Lewis. Perhaps one of the most original aspects of C. S. Lewis' writing is his persistent and powerful appeal to the religious imagination, in developing Augustine's maxim '*desiderium sinus cordis* (longing makes the heart deep)'. Like Augustine, Lewis was aware of certain deep human emotions which pointed to a dimension of our existence beyond time and space. There is, Lewis suggested, a deep and intense feeling of longing within human beings, which no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis terms this sense 'joy', and argues that it points to God as its source and goal (hence the title of his celebrated autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*). Joy, according to Lewis,

is 'an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction . . . anyone who has experienced it will want it again.'¹⁴

To understand Lewis at this point, the idea of 'joy' needs to be explained in some detail. From the windows of his home in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the young Lewis could see the distant Castlereagh Hills. Those distant hills seemed to him to symbolize something which lay beyond his reach. A sense of intense longing arose as he contemplated them. He could not say exactly *what* it was that he longed for; merely that there was a sense of emptiness within him, which the mysterious hills seemed to heighten, without satisfying. Lewis describes this experience (perhaps better known to students of German Romanticism as *Sehnsucht*) in some detail in his autobiography. He relates how, as a young child, he was standing by a flowering currant bush, when—for some unexplained reason—a memory was triggered off.

There suddenly rose in me without warning, as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden . . . comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire; but desire for what? Not, certainly, for a biscuit tin filled with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my own past. . . . and before I knew what I desired, the desire itself was gone, the whole glimpse withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had only taken a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else that had ever happened to me was insignificant in comparison.¹⁵

Lewis here describes a brief moment of insight, a devastating moment of feeling caught up in something which goes far beyond the realms of everyday experience. But what did it mean? What, if anything, did it point to?

Lewis addressed this question in a remarkable sermon entitled 'The Weight of Glory', preached before the University of Oxford on 8 June 1941. Lewis spoke of 'a desire which no natural happiness will

satisfy', 'a desire, still wandering and uncertain of its object and still largely unable to see that object in the direction where it really lies'. There is something self-defeating about human desire, in that what is desired, when achieved, seems to leave the desire unsatisfied. Lewis illustrates this from the age-old quest for beauty, using recognizably Augustinian imagery:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.¹⁶

Human desire, the deep and bitter-sweet longing for something that will satisfy us, points beyond finite objects and finite persons (who seem able to fulfil this desire, yet eventually prove incapable of doing so); it points *through* these objects, and persons towards their real goal and fulfilment in God himself. It is as if human love points to something beyond it, as a parable.

Pleasure, beauty, personal relationships: all seem to promise so much, and yet when we grasp them, we find that what we were seeking was not located in them, but lies beyond them. There is a 'divine dissatisfaction' within human experience, which prompts us to ask whether there is anything which may satisfy the human quest to fulfil the desires of the human heart. Lewis argues that there is. Hunger, he suggests, is an excellent example of a human sensation which corresponds to a real physical need. This need points to the existence of food by which it may be met. Simone Weil echoes this theme, and points to its apologetic importance when she writes: 'The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty.'¹⁷

Thirst, according to Lewis, is a further

example of a human longing pointing to a human need, which in turn points to its fulfilment in drinking—if the human being in question is to survive. Any human longing, he argues, points to a genuine human need, which in turn points to a real object corresponding to that need. A similar point is made, although a little cryptically, in relation to human sexual desire. And so, Lewis suggests, it is reasonable to suggest that the deep human sense of infinite longing which cannot be satisfied by any physical or finite object or person must point to a real human need which can, in some way, be met. Lewis argues that this sense of longing points to its origin and its fulfilment in God himself.

Lewis' less perceptive critics—sadly, more numerous than one might have hoped—argued that his argument rested upon an elementary fallacy. Being hungry didn't prove that there was bread at hand. The feeling of hunger did not necessarily correspond to a supply of food. This objection, Lewis replies, misses the point.

A man's physical hunger does not prove that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation in a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called 'falling in love' occurred in a sexless world.¹⁸

In all this, Lewis echoes a great theme of traditional Christian thinking about the origin and goal of human nature. We are made by God, and we experience a deep sense of longing for him, which only he can satisfy. Although Lewis' reflections on the desire he calls 'joy' reflect his personal experience, it is evident that he (and countless others) consider that this sense of longing is a widespread feature of human nature and experience. An important point of contact for the proclamation of the gospel is thus established.

Lewis' insights also bring new depth to

familiar biblical passages concerning human longing for God. 'As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God' (Ps. 42:1). Note the great sense of *longing* for God expressed in this verse—a sense of longing which assumes added meaning if Lewis' reflections on 'joy' are allowed. Note also the biblical parallel between a sense of need—in this case, animal thirst—and the human need and desire for God.

Theology thus interprets human experience. Yet at times, experience needs to be radically *reinterpreted*. This is a major theme of Luther's 'theology of the cross'.¹⁹ For Luther, the cross mounts a powerful attack on another human resource upon which too much spiritual weight is often placed, especially in modern western thought. The experience of the individual is singled out as having revelatory authority. 'What I experience is what is right.' 'I don't experience it that way.' Luther suggests that individual experience is often seriously unreliable as a guide to matters of faith. The way we experience things isn't necessarily the way things really are.

An example—which I hasten to add is not used by Luther himself—might be helpful in bringing out the point at issue. Suppose you have been out of doors for some time on a very cold night. You arrive at the house of a friend, who notices how cold you are. 'What you need is a good drink,' he tells you. 'Have a glass of brandy.' You drink it. And after a few minutes, you become conscious of a feeling of warmth. You experience the brandy as having warmed you up.

But in fact, the brandy will make you colder. The alcohol causes your blood vessels to dilate, giving you the impression that your body is *producing* heat; in fact, it is *losing* heat. You may feel that you are warming up—but in reality, you are cooling down. Heat is being given off from your body, not taken in by it. Your feelings have led you seriously astray. Were you to drink alcohol to 'warm yourself up' in a bitterly cold situation, it is quite possible you could die from the resulting heat loss. An external observer would be able to detect what was really happening—but this perspective

would be denied to you, to the extent that you relied upon your feelings.

This example has real spiritual relevance. It makes the point that experience needs to be *criticized*. You *felt* that you were being warmed up—but the correct interpretation of that experience is that you actually felt the heat leaving your body, to be radiated outward and lost to you. You need an external reference point by which those feelings can be evaluated and judged. Luther develops a related argument: our experiences of God need to be interpreted. The way we experience things isn't necessarily the way things really are. The cross provides an external reference point by which our feelings can be evaluated and judged.

Perhaps the best way to understand the spiritual importance of Luther's approach here is to consider the scene of helplessness and hopelessness on that first Good Friday, as Jesus Christ died upon the cross. The crowd gathering round the cross were expecting something dramatic to happen. If Jesus really was the son of God, they could expect God to intervene and rescue him. Yet, as that long day wore on, there was no sign of a dramatic divine intervention. In his cry from the cross, even Jesus himself experienced a momentary yet profound sense of the absence of God, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Many expected God to intervene dramatically in the situation, to deliver the dying Jesus. But nothing of the kind happened. Jesus suffered, and finally died. There was no sign of God acting in that situation. So those who based their thinking about God solely on experience drew the obvious conclusion: God was not there.

The resurrection overturned that judgement. God was revealed as having been present and active at Calvary, working out the salvation of humanity and the vindication of Jesus Christ. He was not *perceived* to be present—but present he really was. What experience interpreted as the *absence* of God, the resurrection showed up as the *hidden presence* of God. God may have been experienced as inactive, yet the resurrection showed God to have been active behind the scenes, working in secret. For Luther, the resurrection demonstrates how unreliable the verdict of human experience really is. Instead of

relying upon the misleading impressions of human experience, we should trust in God's promises. God promises to be present with us, even in life's darkest hours—and if experience cannot detect him as being present, then that verdict of experience must be considered unreliable.

This has important results for Luther's understanding of faith. Faith is an ability to see God's presence and activity in the world, and in our own experience. Faith sees behind external appearances and the misleading impressions of experience. It is an openness, a willingness, to find God where he has promised to be, even when experience suggests that he is not there. Luther uses the phrase 'the darkness of faith' to make this point. This has important results for Luther's understanding of the nature of doubt.

Doubt shows up our natural tendency to base our judgements upon experience, rather than faith. When faith and experience seem to be out of step with each other, we tend to trust our experience, rather than faith. But, Luther points out, how unreliable a guide experience turns out to be! Those who trusted in experience on the first Good Friday looked very foolish in the light of the resurrection! For Luther, the resurrection demonstrates the superiority of faith in the promises of God over reliance upon experience or reason. We must learn to let God be God, and trust in him and his promises, rather than in our own finite and inadequate perception of a situation.

3. Theology transforms experience

Christian theology does not simply address the human situation; it offers to transform it. We are not simply told that we are sinners, in need of divine forgiveness and renewal; that forgiveness and renewal is offered to us in the gospel proclamation. If the negative aspect of the Christian proclamation of the crucified Christ is that we are far from God, the positive side is that he offers to bring us home to him through the death and resurrection of his Son. Theology, then, does not simply interpret our experience in terms of alienation from God. It addresses that experience, interprets it as a sign of our global

alienation from God through sin, and offers to transform it through the grace of God.

It is one of the many merits of the writings of C. S. Lewis, that they take seriously the way in which words can *generate* and *transform* experience. In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he comments on the effect of a few lines of poetry upon his imagination. The lines were from Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf*:

I heard a voice that cried,
Balder the beautiful
Is dead, is dead.

These words had a profound impact upon the young Lewis, as he later reflected.

I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale and remote) and then . . . found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it.²⁰

Words, Lewis thus discovered, have the ability to evoke an experience we have not yet had, in addition to describing an experience we are familiar with. That which is known functions as a pointer to that which is yet to be known, and which lies within our grasp. In his essay *The Language of Religion*, Lewis made this crucial point as follows.

This is the most remarkable of the powers of Poetic language: to convey to us the quality of experiences which we have not had, or perhaps can never have, to use factors within our experience so that they become pointers to something outside our experience—as two or more roads on a map show us where a town that is off the map must lie. Many of us have never had an experience like that which Wordsworth records near the end of *Prelude* XIII; but when he speaks of 'the visionary dreariness', I think we get an inkling of it.²¹

At its best, Christian theology shares this characteristic of poetic language (not *poetry* itself, incidentally, Lewis stresses, but the *language used in poetry*), as identified by Lewis—it tries to convey to us the quality of the Christian experience of God. It attempts to point beyond itself, to rise above itself, straining at its lead as it rushes ahead, to point us to a town beyond its map—a town

which it knows is there, but to which it cannot lead us.

Theology is able to use words in such a way as to offer some pointers for the benefit of those who have yet to discover what it feels like to experience God. It uses a cluster of key words to try and explain what it is like to know God, by analogy with words associated with human experience. It is like forgiveness—in other words, if you can imagine what it feels like to be forgiven for a really serious offence, you can begin to understand the Christian experience of forgiveness. It is like reconciliation—if you can imagine the joy of being reconciled to someone who matters very much to you, you can get a glimpse of what the Christian experience of coming home to God is like. It is like coming home after being away and alone for a long time, and perhaps fully expecting never to be able to return. Apologetics uses analogies like these to try and signpost—like roads leading off Lewis' map to an unseen town—the Christian experience of God, for the benefit of those who have yet to have this transforming experience.

But how is it able to use words in this way? Is there not a certain arbitrariness to this whole business? How can we take the human experience of reconciliation, and dare to say that it somehow echoes that of reconciliation with God? It is here that the Christian doctrine of creation undergirds our theological affirmations. The analogy is given, not invented. It is, so to speak, built into the order of things. To speak of 'redemption', 'forgiveness', 'reconciliation' or 'liberation' is indeed to speak of situations within this human world. But it is also, through the creative grace of God, to speak of the entry of God into his world, and his ability to convey himself through our words. He who was rich beyond splendour became poor for our sakes—and that selfsame willingness and ability to become poor is demonstrated in the tender kindness which allows human words—*our* words—to be signposts to him.²²

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored some of the ways in which theology and experience relate to each other. We have argued that there is

no rightful place in Christian theology for any approach that is purely cognitive or purely experiential. Experience and understanding are like two sides of the same coin, which mutually reinforce and enhance one another. The liberal appeal to pure uninterpreted global experience is widely regarded as discredited, partly on account of the considerations noted by George Lindbeck and others, and partly on account of a new awareness of the implications of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. As Stanley Hauerwas remarked, 'Wittgenstein ended forever any attempt on my part to try to anchor theology in some general account of human experience'.²³ Yet this widespread disenchantment with experience as a theological resource must not allow us to reject a significant experiential component in theological reflection. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, experience is a vital 'point of contact' for Christian apologetics in a postmodern world.²⁴ Rather, we must insist that experience is to be addressed, interpreted and transformed in the light of the gospel proclamation of redemption through Christ, as this is made known to us through Scripture. By thus anchoring theology in the bedrock of divine revelation, while linking it up to the world of human experience, we may ensure that Christian theology remains both authentic and relevant in the years that lie ahead. Theology can address experience, without becoming reduced to the level of a mere reiteration of what we experience and observe.

- 1 For a useful analysis, see Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933). The best general study, from a philosophical standpoint, is Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). For a more theological approach, see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (London: SCM Press, 1988).
- 2 See Gerhard Ebeling, 'Die Klage über das Erfahrungsdefizit in der Theologie als Frage nach ihrer Sache', *Wort und Glaube III* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), pp. 3–28.
- 3 For a useful study, see C. Stephen Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1976).
- 4 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*

- (London: SPCK, 1984). For an assessment and critique, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 14–34.
- 5 For other reflections on European theology, see Alister E. McGrath, 'The European Roots of Evangelicalism', *Anvil* 9 (1992), pp. 239–48.
- 6 On Calvin's understanding of the dialectic between theology and experience, see Wilhelm Balke, 'The Word of God and *Experientia* according to Calvin', in W. H. Neuser (ed.), *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor* (Kampen: Kok, 1978), pp. 19–31.
- 7 Søren Kierkegaard, *Unscientific Postscript* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 169–224. Cf. P. L. Holmer, 'Kierkegaard and Religious Propositions', *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955), pp. 135–46.
- 8 For a full discussion, see Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).
- 9 Plato, *Gorgias*, 493b–d.
- 10 Diogenes Allen, *The Traces of God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1981), p. 19.
- 11 Augustine, *Confessions*, I.i.1. Citations are from the recent translation by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3.
- 12 For a superb presentation of Augustine's thoughts on this tension, see John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study in the Religion of St Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), pp. 52–73.
- 13 *Confessions* XII.xvi.23; Chadwick, p. 257.
- 14 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Collins, 1959), p. 20.
- 15 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 19.
- 16 C. S. Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', in *Screwtape Proposes A Toast* (London: Collins, 1965), pp. 97–8.
- 17 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951), p. 210.
- 18 Lewis, 'The Weight of Glory', p. 99.
- 19 For what follows, see McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*. For the implications of this approach for Christian spirituality, see Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992).
- 20 Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 20.
- 21 C. S. Lewis, 'The Language of Religion', in *Christian Reflections* (London: Collins, 1981), p. 169.
- 22 See further McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, pp. 72–80.
- 23 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. xxi.
- 24 See Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992).⁴