

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 35 (1979)  
**Heft:** 5

**Artikel:** On the Hermeneutic of Symbols : the Buri-Hardwick Debate  
**Autor:** Dreisbach, Donald F.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878490>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# On the Hermeneutic of Symbols

## The Buri-Hardwick Debate

The first book-length study of Fritz Buri's theological system appeared in 1972, written by an American scholar, Charley D. Hardwick.<sup>1</sup> He described the historical, theological, and philosophical context out of which Buri's thought grows and Hardwick also severely criticized Buri's position, even claiming that, given the fundamental understanding of faith that Buri has adopted, it is impossible for him to write a Christian theology at all. Further, since Buri is used as an example of existential theology in general, Hardwick expressed doubt about the possibility of any kind of existential theology.<sup>2</sup>

Hardwick's criticism has resulted in something of a debate. Buri has defended his position, this in response to an unpublished earlier draft of Hardwick's book, actually his doctoral dissertation.<sup>3</sup> Hardwick replied in a review of Buri's book, where he also gave a useful summary of his objections, and Buri made a brief response.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Hardwick reviewed Buri's later book, *Der Pantokrator*.<sup>5</sup> This debate is interesting, often heated, and ultimately disappointing. Buri has not answered Hardwick's objections, and sometimes appears not really to appreciate their force. Hardwick, on the other hand, seems sometimes not to have understood Buri's position and so raises unjustified objections which obscure the force of his more important criticism.

In the following pages I will review and evaluate some of Hardwick's objections. I will also suggest a way of understanding Buri's method that is implicit in his writing but is never made explicit. If viewed in the way I suggest, Buri's work avoids some of Hardwick's most serious criticism.

Hardwick's first and primary charge is that Buri can "say only *that* faith occurs but not *what* its content is".<sup>6</sup> It is impossible for Buri "to give any real content to the Christian self-understanding".<sup>7</sup> Hardwick's claim is in a sense correct.

The *act of faith*, the adoption of a self-understanding, according to Buri, takes place at the level of Existenz, beyond all objectivity. He describes it as follows:

<sup>1</sup> C. D. Hardwick, *Faith and Objectivity. Fritz Buri and the Hermeneutical Foundations of a Radical Theology* (1972). Buri is treated at some length in F. Konrad, *Das Offenbarungsverständnis in der evangelischen Theologie* (1971). Buri's Christology is the subject of Imelda Abbt, *Tradition, Christus, Existenz* (1977).

<sup>2</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), pp. 109, 224.

<sup>3</sup> F. Buri, *Gott in Amerika. Amerikanische Theologie seit 1960* (1970).

<sup>4</sup> C. D. Hardwick, *Fritz Buri's Gott in Amerika: Theol. Zts.* 27 (1971), pp. 411–26; F. Buri, *Zu Charley D. Hardwicks Kritik*: *ibid.*, pp. 426–28.

<sup>5</sup> C. D. Hardwick, *God and the Christian Self-Understanding: Journ. of Religion* 50 (1970), pp. 419–40, is a review of F. Buri, *Der Pantokrator* (1969).

<sup>6</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. XXXII.

<sup>7</sup> Hardwick (n. 4), p. 413.

Der Glaubensakt selber jedoch ist etwas völlig Ungegenständliches. In ihm kann sich der Glaubende nicht noch einmal zuschauen. Er selber ist der, welcher glaubt. Der Begriff des Glaubensaktes ist etwas anderes als sein unmittelbarer Vollzug. Hier im Vollzug hört jede Vergegenständlichung und darum auch jede Begrifflichkeit auf. Deshalb sind hier auch die Regeln der Logik nicht mehr anwendbar. Der Glaubensakt ist nicht etwas Unlogisches, sondern etwas Überlogisches, etwas, das dem logischen Denken gar keine Möglichkeit bietet, in Aktion zu treten. Er ist überhaupt kein Etwas, sondern pure Aktualität.<sup>8</sup>

Given this description of the act of faith, a reconsideration of Hardwick's objection is in order. What Hardwick seems to be seeking, and finding wanting, in Buri's system is an objective description of this immediate enactment (Vollzug) of faith. But if the act of faith is indeed nonobjective, it is quite obvious that Buri can produce no objective account of the content of that act, and simply to point out this obvious fact cannot count as a serious criticism. It is, therefore, no surprise that in his response Buri has replied with considerable heat.

However, Hardwick does raise objections closely related to this primary one which are much more significant.<sup>9</sup> One such question is that if the content of faith cannot be defined, it is impossible to specify what makes Christian faith Christian.

At the level of pure subjectivity there obviously can be no objective specification of faith. But Buri's theology is characterized by a dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity. The objective realm is necessary; it calls faith into being and gives that faith expression. And without an objective expression of faith, faith and the self remain incomplete. As Buri says:

Ohne Vergegenständlichung unseres Selbstverständnisses und seiner Gottbezogenheit können wir dieses Selbstverständnis des Glaubens weder vollziehen noch klären und mitteilen, also nicht eigentlich Person sein.<sup>10</sup>

Faith, then, is dependent upon objective elements which call it into being, give it expression, and bring it to fulfillment. These objective elements are handed down through a tradition. Hence faith is always enacted out of and expresses itself in a tradition, a tradition consisting of myths, images, doctrines, and so forth. For Buri, the objective elements of a tradition, even the doctrines, do not have their primary significance for faith in their objective meaning but rather in the movement of self-understanding which they initiate and express. When myths so function, when they are not experienced as objective assertions about reality but as calls to and expressions of subjective self-understanding, Buri calls them symbols.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> F. Buri, *Dogmatik als Selbstverständnis des christlichen Glaubens*, 1–2 (1956–1962), pp. 86–87.

<sup>9</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 69, does in fact understand Buri's intention, as well as the nonobjective nature of the act of self-definition, Hardwick (n. 5), p. 421. It is hard to understand why he wants to emphasize the question of content.

<sup>10</sup> Buri (n. 8), 2, p. 288.

<sup>11</sup> Hardwick (n. 1) treats this on pp. 126–27.

If we return to the question of what makes Christian faith Christian, Buri's answer now emerges. A faith is Christian because it is historically situated in and grows out of the Christian tradition. As long as the act of faith is seen as a subjective act, closed to objective investigation, it is clear that the Christian faith cannot be distinguished from other forms of faith, be they Muslim, Hindu, or what have you, in terms of *content*. The question of the content of faith, insofar as that faith is an act, is for Buri a closed one. But the uniqueness of Christian faith can be specified in terms of the historical tradition out of which it grows and the symbols which call it into being and give it expression. Whether this is an adequate mode of specification is an issue I will return to later.

If the uniqueness of Christian faith is tied to the symbols which call that faith into being and give it expression, further investigation of the adequacy of this mode of specification depends upon an understanding of the method of interpretation of symbols. This problem is raised by Hardwick, who puts it as follows:

If it is to be possible to interpret faith and revelation, then there must be some way of mediating among (i) the objective form of the tradition, (ii) the nonobjectivity of revelation as it is actualized in faith, and (iii) the objectivity of theological discourse itself. This means that Buri must develop additional hermeneutical principles which allow him to mediate between these various levels of objectivity and nonobjectivity. Otherwise theology is impossible on his terms.<sup>12</sup>

This is the real and critical tissue, far more important for the success or failure of Buri's enterprise than the question of the content of faith. And, as Hardwick quite correctly points out, merely to say that the tradition consists of symbols and that to do theology is to interpret symbols is not to solve the problem but only to state it. If symbols are interpreted in terms of objective truths, in terms of signs, it appears that their symbolic nature is lost. But if symbols are interpreted in terms of other symbols, this is in fact no interpretation at all, as the result is an infinite regress of symbols, one set interpreting another.<sup>13</sup> And tied to this problem of interpretation is the further question of the specification of the relation of symbols to self-understanding. As Hardwick puts it, in Buri's theology "the only relationship between Christian assertions and Christian existence is causal or even magical".<sup>14</sup>

This problem of the precise account of how symbols are to be interpreted without on the one hand merely producing more symbols which themselves need interpretation, i.e., never entering the realm of the objective, and on the other hand without interpreting symbols in terms of an objective account of the content of self-understanding, i.e., destroying the realm of the subjective, is important if Buri's theology is to have a firm foundation. In his responses to Hardwick, Buri does not deal directly with this problem, and indeed I do not see that Buri has at any place in his writing provided an answer. However, from the lack of such an answer,

<sup>12</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 179.

Hardwick appears to conclude that such an answer is impossible, both in Buri's theology and in existential theology in general. The support for this conclusion appears to lie in the negative conclusions Hardwick reaches about Buri's interpretation of the Christian tradition in his "Dogmatik". Briefly stated, Hardwick's claim is that Buri's interpretation of the tradition either reduces to a restatement of his systematic principle, i.e., "*that* faith is always an existential actualization of a paradox of grace and *that* it occurs in a specific historicity", or that Buri goes beyond the limits of objectivity which he himself has set up.<sup>15</sup> An evaluation of this claim is beyond the scope of this article, but it is clear that he has built a strong case. However, proof that Buri has not successfully carried out his project is not in itself proof that such a project is impossible, nor is it sufficient ground for denying that Buri has pointed out a plausible direction for post-Bultmannian theology to take.

## 2.

But how is a *theology* based on Buri's principles *possible*? If Buri cannot specify the content of the Christian faith, is it possible for his "Dogmatik" to have any positive content? To answer these questions we might begin with a simpler one, what is the function of dogmatic, a question which Buri himself raises. In fact, he raises the question often, and does not always give consistent answers. He asks how dogmatic can be a science (Wissenschaft) without losing the object of faith.<sup>16</sup> Buri does, unfortunately, sometimes speak as though dogmatic does deal in an objective way with the content of faith, although it is about the Word of God and is not itself the Word of God.<sup>17</sup> Buri also says that dogmatic is revelation.

Dogmatik ist in ihren positiven Ausführungen gegenständlich gewordene Offenbarung, d. h. Mythologie als Ausdruck des christlichen Selbstverständnisses.<sup>18</sup>

But at other places Buri is much more cautious and negative. He says for instance that the function of explanation, and here I assume that he means the rational process in general, is to protect faith from mis- and self-misunderstanding, and not to turn faith into an object.<sup>19</sup> Dogmatic also functions in conceptual and scientific investigations to protect proclamation from its own becoming "Pseudowissenschaft und Dogmatismus". It keeps "Schriftverkündigung von falschen Normen . . . frei, dass in ihr das Wort Gottes in Jesus Christus sich selber als diejenige Norm erweisen kann, welche sowohl alle anderen gegenständlichen Normen als auch ihre eigenen Vergegenständlichungen ständig aufhebt . . .".<sup>20</sup> In a further statement about the function and limits of thought in relation to authority and to faith, Buri says:

<sup>15</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 268.

<sup>19</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 143.

<sup>20</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 437.

Wenn auch die Entscheidung des Glaubens gegenüber den ihm begegnenden Möglichkeiten des Selbstverständnisses, welche sich ihm in den Ansprüchen von Autoritäten eröffnen, nicht durch gegenständliches Denken vollzogen oder für gegenständliches Erkennen als allgemein richtig ausgewiesen werden kann, so ist es doch allein das gegenständliche Denken, das diese Situation zum Bewusstsein bringt, und können die Feststellung, Abgrenzung, gegenseitige Inbeziehungsetzung und Klärung der in dieser Situation begegnenden Ansprüche und der ihnen entsprechenden Möglichkeiten des Selbstverständnisses nur mittels gegenständlichen Erkennens erfolgen.<sup>21</sup>

We have, then, several different descriptions of the role of objective thought in a dogmatic system. As a first step toward bringing these different descriptions into coherent unity, we should notice that for Buri objective thought has two related but quite separate functions for dogmatics, a positive and a negative. In its negative function a thinking dogmatic protects faith from false objectivity, from dogmatism and pseudoscience, and defines the limits of the knowable in order to make room for the non-objective act of faith. (Here, of course, we have a clear echo of Kant.) Before proceeding to the positive aspect of thought, we might consider this negative function. There are two important points to note. First, a great deal of the material in Buri's "Dogmatik" is of this negative sort. That is, a great deal of what Buri does is to demonstrate the inadequacies of interpretations of the tradition other than his own. He does this by displaying their contradictions, faulty scriptural basis, or unwanted objectification. This is, of course, a sound procedure.

Secondly, Buri's method here is one of reason, argument, and standard scholarly procedure. This is not to say that every position Buri takes is necessarily correct, but, unless one wants to call the entire process of reason and scholarship into question, there is no difficulty here with Buri's epistemological method and he is under no obligation to defend it. Hence whether or not Buri can answer Hardwick's objections, a great part of Buri's "Dogmatik" is beyond the reach of those objections.

While this negative use of reason is an important aim and function of Buri's theology, there remains the positive side. Is it possible for Buri to give a positive interpretation of the Christian tradition without falling into that very objectivity from which he is at such pains to protect dogmatics or into the infinite regress of interpreting symbols by other symbols which themselves need further symbolic interpretation? Can one talk objectively about faith without turning faith into an object, or interpret the tradition without in effect replacing the tradition with the interpretation? In the above quotation we saw that for Buri, although objective thought cannot bring about or demonstrate the rightness of the decision of faith, such objective thought can bring to attention and clarify the human situation in which such decision is both possible and necessary, and it is only by means of objective thought that the assertions of authority, which grow out of the tradition, can be related to and can be seen to offer particular possibilities of self-understanding. While this is a beginning to an account of the positive function of objec-

<sup>21</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 395.

tive thought, it is only a beginning, and does not explain how the mythical elements of a tradition would be interpreted. Hardwick argues, I think rightly, that Buri offers no such explanation.<sup>22</sup> But what would such an explanation be like? Where might we look for a clue to the successful construction of such an explanation?

I suggest that we begin by seeking an analogy to some area of experience similar to the religious, and some area of intellectual activity similar to that which Buri is engaged in. One such area is that of *aesthetic experience*. Clearly, the experience of a work of art is not exactly the same as Buri claims our encounter with the Christian tradition is or should be, and I am not proposing that religious experience be equated with aesthetic. But there is a similarity. In encountering a work of art we encounter something that is objective, that stands over against our subjectivity. Such an encounter can be the source of objective information, e.g., what sort of clothes people wore in the 16th Century, but generally we think of art as providing something more than this. What this "more" might be is difficult to explain, but unless we are willing to dismiss art as of no import to human existence, it seems reasonable to say that through the encounter with the work of art we are in some way changed.

But we not only have art, we also have that realm of intellectual activity known as art criticism or art scholarship. The critic plays a peculiar and sometimes an important role. His function is to talk about, to explicate, the work of art. In some cases the work of art, for a given viewer, may well speak for itself, and any advice or information from outside may interfere with the relationship between viewer and work. But there are surely other cases where the work of art itself is, to a given viewer, totally opaque without the help and guidance of the critic, and other cases where the critic can deepen and enhance one's appreciation of the work. Yet despite one's use of, and even reliance on, the critic, criticism does not replace the work itself. The work of art is and remains primary, yet the critic, if he is successful, alters and enhances one's relation to the work without standing between it and viewer.

Buri, I suggest, plays a similar role in his treatment of the Christian tradition. In the negative function of his dogmatic he preserves the tradition from misunderstanding and false objectification; in the positive function he attempts to bring to life by explication, clarification, and perhaps even exhortation the symbols of the tradition, although it is the symbols themselves and not Buri's commentary on them which bring about and then express the subjective enactment of self-understanding. Buri's hermeneutic, then, is not a "cracking of the code", a discovery of the "real meaning" hidden behind the symbols. Symbols function in and of themselves, as the *Gegenständlichkeit des Ungegenständlichen*<sup>23</sup>, the language of personal Transcendence revealed to faith in its historicity.<sup>24</sup> Hence Hardwick's ob-

<sup>22</sup> Hardwick also sees a positive and negative side to Buri's procedure, although he treats them in a manner somewhat different from mine: Hardwick (n. 5), p. 423.

<sup>23</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 294.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 399.

servation “that the religious man may ‘understand’ the traditional mythological language of the Christian tradition, in the sense that this language is used (not interpreted) as an expression for the existential content of the Christian faith, without being able or needing to give (a) theological account of it”<sup>25</sup> is in accord with and does not count as a criticism of Buri’s position.

A comparison of Buri’s work to that of the art critic is not completely arbitrary, but is suggested by Buri himself. In fact, in his «Bildnerische Kunst und Theologie» the similarity between art and theology is the main thesis of the book.

Bei aller Verschiedenartigkeit und Gegensätzlichkeit, welche bildnerische Kunst und Theologie in ihrem Wesen, in ihren einzelnen Ausprägungen und in ihren gegenseitigen Verhältnisbestimmungen aufweisen, ist beiden Größen doch gemeinsam, dass sie in ihrer Gegenständlichkeit jeweils Aussagen eines in seinem Vollzug ungegenständlichen gläubigen Selbstverständnisses darstellen.<sup>26</sup>

And Buri’s talent for calling attention to and explicating the religious significance of works of art is amply demonstrated in his «Die Bilder und das Wort am Basler Münster». This little book is a collection of sermons, sermons which deal not only with the frescos and statues in and on the Basler Münster, but even with the structure of the building itself. But they are sermons, not lectures in art history, although Buri clearly knows the background of that of which he speaks. Here Buri in his function as preacher is acting partly as theologian and partly as art critic, and his intention is to call to his listeners’ attention the human significance of some of the art which surrounds them. A good example of what he is doing is a Christmas sermon, taking as text the visit of the three kings (Matt. 2, 1–11) but treating the statues of the three kings high up on the Georgsturm of the Münster. In the middle of the sermon we find the following:

Die ungewohnte Darstellung der drei Könige ist für uns von ungeahnter Aktualität. Von ihren luftigen Standorten an den drei Turmecken aus rufen sie uns das ganze Jahr hindurch in Erinnerung, wie es mit uns eigentlich steht.<sup>27</sup>

The sermon itself, of course, treats the question of «wie es mit uns eigentlich steht», but, significantly, Buri says that it is these statues rather than his own treatment of them which call to mind what our situation is. But why then say anything? Why not simply point to the statues and let them speak for themselves?

The answer to these questions is not difficult. There may well be people who have noticed the statues and feel their significance. For such sensitive souls Buri has little or nothing to offer. Yet most people, passing by the Münster, have not

<sup>25</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> F. Buri, *Bildnerische Kunst und Theologie* (1965), p. 23. Buri has also written two books in which he operates as theologian and literary critic: Gottfried Kellers Glaube. Ein Bekenntnis zu seinem Protestantismus (1944); Prometheus und Christus. Grösse und Grenzen von Carl Spitteler’s religiöser Weltanschauung (1945).

<sup>27</sup> F. Buri, *Die Bilder und das Wort am Basler Münster* (1961), p. 27.

noticed or, having noticed, have not appropriated the significance of these statues for the understanding of their situation. Hence, for most, Buri's work is useful, even necessary. But again, it is the statues and not Buri which call and keep the situation in mind.

I am suggesting that this model be transferred to Buri's treatment of the Christian tradition in general. It is the symbols of that tradition which call to mind the human situation, elicit a decision within that situation, and then give expression to that decision, or to the self-understanding that results from it. The relation is in one sense an immediate and non-objective one, between symbol and self. But in another sense the relation is mediated by the rational, objective discussion of the theologian, but this only because without his mediation the more important, immediate relation might not take place.

And in Buri's «Der Pantokrator» we see an interesting movement. The book begins with the treatment of art works, of the mosaics, frescos, and icons of Greek Orthodox churches. It proceeds, without any clear break in style or methodology, to a treatment of a wide variety of theological problems. Again, I would suggest that the theological and doctrinal questions are treated in the same way as the pictures, frescos, and icons. Buri does indeed talk objectively about them, but the function of this objective talk is not in itself to define or determine our self-understanding, but to free and to explicate the elements of the tradition so that we can appropriate them and let them be actual, functioning symbols for us.

If Buri's work is viewed in the way I have suggested, it is no longer caught in the dilemma Hardwick claimed. Buri's theology does consist of objective assertions; hence Buri is not caught in the infinite regress of interpreting symbols by other symbols. But these objective assertions are about but do not replace the symbols of the tradition. The symbols are left with their symbolic power and Buri cannot be accused of claiming for his theology greater power or authority than Scripture and tradition.

### 3.

The analogy with the work of art also helps to clarify the relation of the symbol to *self-understanding*. Hardwick claims that this relation is "causal or even magical".<sup>28</sup> He intends this to be a critical comment, but it actually serves to call attention to the mysterious way in which significant human response, in any sphere, is brought about. In Buri's view we are confronted by our *tradition*, the product of the faith, the self-understanding, of Christians of the past, and the revelatory power of the symbols of that tradition is not at our disposal. Symbols can gain, lose, or change their significance for us, and this is something that is out of our control.<sup>29</sup> It is not the case that symbols are served up to us «wie auf einem Prä-

<sup>28</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 179.

<sup>29</sup> Buri (n. 8), 1, p. 290. There is therefore nothing to prevent theological assertions, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, from acquiring the status of symbol and entering the tradition as such.

sentierteller fixfertig, so dass man sich ihrer bedienen oder sie stehenlassen kann, je nachdem wie sie uns ansprechen».<sup>30</sup> We do not simply come to a response about the symbols; rather, symbols elicit a response from us.

The situation is similar when we experience and appreciate a work of art. We are then in some way moved or changed, although just how and why this change takes place is not easy to explain. The relation of art object to viewing subject is not a purely rational or intellectual one, nor is it purely emotional, but it is real and efficacious and not completey under our control. One might well call this relation, at least at a first level of reflection, “causal or even magical”.

The claim that the relation of self to art is mysterious but similar to the relation of Christian to the Christian tradition does not in itself solve Buri's problem of describing the relation of symbol to self-understanding. However, the analogy does place Buri's problem in a larger context, and that is sufficient to greatly increase the plausibility of his position. Hardwick is correct in his claim that Buri has not adequately explained the nature of this relationship, but this failure should be evaluated in terms of reasonable expectations. A satisfactory analysis of personal response – whether it be to art, to other people, or to the symbols of a tradition – is extremely difficult to produce, and it would be unreasonable to expect Buri, whose main concern is the content of a dogmatic, to resolve such a difficult problem.

Hardwick also sees an additional danger in Buri's treatment of the tradition, a failure to establish any distinction between theology and preaching. According to Hardwick:

Despite Buri's careful articulation of the conceptual task of theology, he in fact has no basis for a distinction between theology and proclamation. The theologian's task of interpreting symbols becomes indistinguishable from the preacher's task of calling men to a new self-understanding. This is disastrous because the preacher is dependent on the theologian for the careful statement of the content of the faith he proclaims.<sup>31</sup>

It is quite true that a theology in Buri's style cannot specify the content of faith, of the *Glaubensakt*. But this is hardly disastrous. If I am at all correct in understanding Buri's position, it is not, in his view, the preacher but the symbols of the tradition which call men to a new self-understanding. The preacher's function is to articulate these symbols, insofar as they are verbal. He of course does more than this; he also interprets them. And here Buri is helpful in that he provides a method of approaching and interpreting the symbols, and an example, his own very lengthy treatment of a great many of those symbols. Buri's theology also aids the preacher by opening up objective assertions and dogmatism, so that the symbols as proclaimed by the preacher become free to elicit a change in men's self-understanding.

But after all this is said, it still makes sense to ask, as Hardwick does, what

<sup>30</sup> Buri, personal communication.

<sup>31</sup> Hardwick (n. 1), p. 187.

makes Christianity Christian, what differentiates the Christian religion and Christian theology from other religions and theologies, or from humanistic atheism. One answer, a partial one, has already been discussed. The Christian self-understanding is situated in the Christian tradition. It grows out of and expresses itself in those symbols which make up that tradition. Hardwick wishes to push the question further, and elicits from Buri an unusual reply.

Was schliesslich die von Hardwick in Frage gestellte Christlichkeit meiner Theologie, d. h. das von ihm bei mir vermisste Kriterium eines spezifisch christlichen gegenüber einem «bloss» menschlichen Selbstverständnis betrifft, so gestehe ich, dass ich in der Tat über kein derartiges dogmatisch-normativ verwendbares Kriterium verfüge, wohl aber über eines, das eindeutig feststellen lässt, was als menschlich schlechthin, und was als Verrat der Bestimmung zum Menschsein zu gelten hat. Diese Norm ereignet sich im Innenerwerben unserer Bestimmung zu einem sich unbedingt füreinander und miteinander Verantwortlichwissen, der wir uns, ohne unaufrechtig zu werden, nicht entziehen können.<sup>32</sup>

This statement presents difficulties. It appears to be objective knowledge, but the source of this knowledge is by no means clear. Is it a priori, or is it the result of philosophical investigation? Or does it in fact result from Buri's own interpretation of and response to the Christian symbols? If the latter be true, then Buri ought to show that there are no other possible and authentic human possibilities, such as pure passivity, mystical escape from the concrete world and from other persons, even pure selfishness. Buri might find such descriptions of life possibilities, of potential self-understandings, to be unappealing or even repulsive, and so might other Western, Christian readers. But such readers grow out of essentially the same culture, surrounded by the same myths and symbols, that Buri does. Might no such life choices be possible, indeed even be “correct and proper”, in the context of other cultures and religions?

And so the question remains, what makes Christianity different from other religions, if indeed it is different. But if my discussion of Buri's methodology is at all correct, the question is an empirical-critical one. A critical commentary such as Buri performs on the Christian tradition would have to be done on the symbol structure of the religion in question, to see the coherence of the symbols, the direction in which they point, and the expression they give to whatever subjective self-understanding they elicit. It is not the content of self-understanding but the objective expression of this content that would be the object of investigation. It is quite conceivable that all religions do, when their symbol structures are so analysed, manifest a similar self-understanding. But then again they might not. The question cannot be solved by speculation, but only by empirical-critical work, and it is only by this method that the uniqueness of Christianity, if it is in fact unique, can be demonstrated.

*Donald F. Dreisbach, Marquette, Mich.*

<sup>32</sup> Buri (n. 4), p. 428.