Before jumping into discussion with my colleagues regarding their views on The Irony of Theology, I wish to express my thanks to Professor Abrahim Khan for organizing a forum for discussion of the book at the 1991 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion held at Queen’s University in Kingston. I wish also to thank the editors of this journal not only for publishing the revised reviews of two of those presentations but for allowing me this opportunity to respond to their comments and criticisms. Furthermore, I appreciate this opportunity to express my thanks as well to the other discussants and participants in that forum for having taken the time to assess the argument I present in The Irony of Theology and to provide me with their views of its strengths, ambiguities, and weaknesses. Even though, as the discussion below will attest, I have not agreed with much of the debate regarding the thesis and argument in that book I have found the discussion stimulating, interesting, and immensely helpful.

A RESPONSE TO THE REVIEWS

One matter I have found of particular interest, and surprise, in the discussion at Queen’s University, as well as in subsequent reviews that have appeared in various journals and other periodicals, is the wide discrepancy of opinion expressed in regard to the nature, quality, and significance of the argument of the book and the “evidence” adduced in
its support. Since only two of four presentations made at the forum at Queen’s are included here the radical differences of interpretation of the book is not as clear as it might have been. That fact, however, itself stands as a kind of critique of the book for it must be acknowledged that one explanation for this state of affairs is that the author has not clearly structured the argument and marshalled the evidence in support of the claims being made. On the other hand, it is possible that the conclusions reached in the book are so unpalatable in some quarters that the argument in their support has not really received the benefit of dispassionate analysis. This latter suggestion is, obviously, self-serving but in light of the vehemence of some responses to the book both at the forum at Queen’s and in the published reviews it seems to me not altogether inappropriate to suggest it as a possible account for the wide disparity of interpretation of the work. After all, the conclusions reached with regard to the negative impact of theology on religion in this analysis of the nature of religious thought would, if taken seriously, have profound implications for a broad range of theological scholarship as well as for religious communities themselves. Furthermore, the implications for the study of religion in the conclusions reached would also, if taken seriously, have a significant transforming effect upon the community of scholars concerned with the study of religion in our publicly funded academic communities. And the critics of The Irony of Theology have not been unaware of these “facts.” Before proceeding to my specific responses to the critiques presented by Professors Dawson and Settle above, therefore, I think it might be of some benefit to review briefly the nature of the criticism that has thus far appeared in other published reviews of the book.

Some critics, to my surprise, have seen The Irony of Theology primarily as a methodological essay in the field of Religious Studies and concerned essentially with the question of the nature of the relationship of that academic “discipline” to theology (and religion). Terrence Tilley (Journal of the American Academy of Religion 72 [1992]: 455-56) for example, sees the argument as merely concerned with laying the groundwork for justifying a reductionist approach to the study of religion. John Macquarrie’s assessment (Times Higher Education Supplement 12 July, 1991), in the same vein, though in a more ironic tone, sees the argument as an attempt on my part to deal with a psychological difficulty he suspects I have in teaching both in a faculty of divinity and in a department for the study of religion in a secular university context. (Dawson also makes it clear from the outset, as I shall point out below, that he is not concerned with the historical/philosophical aspect of the