UNTIL ALL THE WOMEN ARE STRONG, ALL THE MEN ARE GOOD LOOKING, AND ALL THE CHILDREN ARE ABOVE AVERAGE: THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN LIGHT AND PROMISE OF A NEW DAY

Byron C. Bangert
Bloomington, IN

INTRODUCTION

In an essay published in *The Christian Century* almost thirty years ago, Sheila Collins observed:

> "Throughout history--so textual critics and anthropologists agree--societies have elevated certain of their social infrastructures to the realm of belief; and such belief systems in turn have become the justification for the continuation of the social structures from which they sprang. As sophisticated Christians, I think we all realize that Christianity, though revelatory, has not been without its cultural taint."[1]

Collin's immediate purpose in her essay is to make a case for feminist theology, based on evidences of patriarchy and its attendant subordination of women to men within the Christian scriptures and tradition. Her claim regarding the relationship between social infrastructures and systems of belief, however, is much more widely applicable. For example, those who study economics with a critical eye risk the discovery that free market economic theory provides a far from accurate description of economic events "on the ground." The components of the theory may be--perhaps necessarily are--sufficiently correlated to actual economic entities and systems to appear to provide a realistic model of actual economic activity. Nonetheless, the theory functions much more effectively as an ideological justification for maintaining key features of the capitalist economy than as a complete or accurate account of what is going on.

Those who have studied the relationship between race and religion in America likewise know that biblical interpreters in slave-holding states tended to find in their scriptures sufficient theological justification for the practice of slavery, while biblical interpreters in non-slave-holding states more often concluded from the same scriptures that slavery violated the laws of God. A similar pattern and dynamic is being repeated today in many church denominations as they struggle over the question of the appropriate status of gay and lesbian persons in church life and society. Traditional interpreters claim scriptural and theological warrant for proscribing homosexual relations, and thus legitimate the exclusion of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons from church office and, in some cases, even membership. Interpreters sympathetic to the claims and circumstances of the gay and lesbian persons in their midst find themselves offering new justifications based on revised exegetical and theological understandings of the accepted meaning and authority of the ancient texts.

Theories and systems of belief function not only as reflections or models of actual practices, systems, and structures, but also as justifications for those practices, systems, and structures.

---

[1] "Toward a Feminist Theology," *The Christian Century*, August 2, 1972.

Collins minces no words when she applies this insight to gender relations:

> Just as the theory of the divine right of kings served to legitimize a feudal system which kept a vast majority of the people in subjection and poverty, so the system of male-oriented symbols, doctrines and taboos in the Judeo-Christian tradition has served to keep females in subjection to men and in spiritual, if not always physical, poverty.[2]

I agree with Collins on this point, and I share most of the concerns of feminist theologians. However, the point of my essay is not to advance a specifically feminist agenda. My intention is to explore the question of theological anthropology in light of the critical insight that informs Collins' work. More specifically, the claim here is that Christian theology, "though revelatory," must also be critically examined as a belief system or ideology that shares the traits of other belief systems and ideologies. The historical and cultural contexts in which Christian theology has emerged and developed have left their distinctive marks upon it. Christian theology has consequently served in many and various ways to legitimate and justify the patterns, practices, and power distributions of the social orders of its originating and developing contexts.

There are other ways to state the first part of this claim. For example, one may say that Christian theology is historically contingent and culturally conditioned. When stated in this way, the focus of concern tends to be directed toward the status of the truth claims that Christian theology makes. The central question becomes, How does one differentiate between the "wheat" of true revelation and the "chaff" of cultural taint in the claims of Christianity? I am certainly interested in this question, but I want to insist that it is not an academic question. Nor is it only a strictly theological question. That is to say, it is not only a question regarding what Christians, as Christians, are to believe. It is a question that has implications for how we, as Christians, are to live.

WHY THEOLOGY MATTERS

This brings us to the second part of the above claim, namely, that Christian theology also functions to a considerable extent as a legitimizing ideology for the social order. It is most important to recognize that this claim is not tantamount, *ipso facto,* to an indictment of Christian theology. There is much in our prevailing social order that we presumably desire to legitimate and that we might defend on Christian grounds. There are many values and practices in our social existence for which it is useful to invoke the justifications of Christian theology. The claim regarding the role of theology in justifying existing social arrangements does become something of an indictment, however, whenever it becomes clear that there is something undesirable about the social order that nevertheless receives continuing legitimation from Christian theological doctrine, symbol, or tradition.

In other words, Christian theology has profound ethical significance. In his well-known essay, "Human Being," theologian David H. Kelsey provides a brief account of the development of a doctrine of theological anthropology within Christianity. In a passage on the social dimension of human nature he notes the contributions of Augustine and Aquinas to what he calls the "classic

---

[2]Ibid.

formulation" of the doctrine. Noting ways in which Augustine argued for the hierarchical subordination of women to men, and the further claims of Aquinas that women are deficient expressions of human nature, Kelsey calmly yet pointedly observes:

> At this point both moral and theological considerations raise radical doubts about the adequacy of the classic formulation of the doctrine of human nature. One has to ask whether it is moral to hold a view that has caused so much human anguish.[3]

Kelsey assumes, without further argument, that Christian theological beliefs have ethical implications. I might have begun this essay with this assumption, an assumption that I cannot imagine will meet with disagreement from anyone who believes that theology matters. But because I am going to reflect at some length upon the practical, moral, and ethical implications of Christian beliefs, it seemed useful to provide some indication of how it is that beliefs matter. In Sheila Collins' terms, beliefs matter because they provide legitimation and justification for certain --and by implication, fail to do so for other--practices, systems, and structures within the social order. If Collins is wrong, then it is not clear that theology is of any consequence at all.

It may appear that I am denying to theology any role as social critique. To the contrary, I will contend that this a crucial role for theology today. But I do not imagine theology playing this role except as a dissenting voice, emerging from a particular place and time, within the larger society. It is possible for theology to play this role precisely because no society is uniformly ordered, no legitimating belief system is equally compelling upon all members of a society. (Primitive societies might constitute an exception, but no one from such a society will be reading this essay!) Within any society or social order one can expect to find those whose beliefs are rooted in a different constellation of life experiences from that of the prevailing majority or dominating minority. The stories of Israel and of Christianity are replete with instances of lonely prophetic voices, drawing upon shared religious traditions, yet dissenting from contemporary religious practices, doctrines, and legitimations. Jesus of Nazareth stands clearly within this "dissenting tradition" of what later generations have come to regard as faithful witness. The Protestant reformers doubtless saw themselves as Christians who were laying claim to this "dissenting tradition" as well. Their theological reformulations of the dominant traditions were not thereby exempt from historical contingency and cultural condition. Nonetheless, they were clearly engaged in theological and social critique of a sort that made a real difference.

It is not within the scope of this essay to account for how it is that new theological insights arise and come to expression. Specifically, I will not take up the Christian doctrine of revelation, though I will later make some claims regarding the validity of experience as well as reason and knowledge of the world as sources of theology. The point to be underscored here is that theology, as a system of beliefs, ideas, and symbols, is a matter of ethical significance, precisely because it matters. It matters in that it makes a difference in terms of how we perceive, understand, and act upon the question of how we are to live. Theology matters in that it provides, or fails to provide, legitimation and justification for social patterns, structures, and practices. Alternatively, at times

---

[3]Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION TO ITS TRADITIONS AND TASKS (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1982), p. 148

theology matters precisely because it is able to provide a critique that contributes to the transformation of prevailing social arrangements and ways of being.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Now, Christian theology has many facets. It has traditionally been constituted by many doctrines. These doctrines do not stand alone, but contribute to a comprehensive theological system or worldview. Thus, it is difficult if not impossible to extract and assess any single doctrine in isolation from other doctrines. This is especially true of theological anthropology, or the Christian doctrine of humankind. There are at least two primary ways to elaborate a doctrine of humankind. The classic approach, as Kelsey notes, has been to draw upon Genesis 1-3, which includes the declaration that human beings have been created in the image of God. There is no consensus among biblical scholars or theologians regarding the meaning of the *imago Dei*. Thus, one of the tasks of theological anthropology is to provide an interpretation of the *imago Dei* idea. It is highly likely, therefore, that whatever conclusions one reaches pertaining to theological anthropology will have immediate implications for one's understanding of God, in whose image humankind has been created. And vice versa.

Theological anthropology may also be elaborated in terms of the person of Jesus, who is identified by the tradition as both the Son of God and "true" human. More contemporary theology often speaks of Jesus as "fully human." Thus, in Jesus, Christians claim to see the human being as God intended each of us to be. Because Jesus is also identified as Son of God, and even "true" God, the link here between human self-perception and -understanding and our understanding of God's character and being could hardly be more intimate or immediate. Whether elaborated in terms of the "image of God," or in terms of the "fully human" Jesus, our theological anthropology, or doctrine of humankind, is bound to have direct and possibly profound significance for our doctrine of God.[4]

It is hardly possible to anticipate and address every objection that may be raised to the approach taken here. Doubtless there are those who would object to this and any other kind of "theology from below." They would insist that the Christian doctrine of God must not be contingent upon, or derivative of, a Christian doctrine of humankind in any way. The doctrine of God, in their view, must be epistemologically privileged over any other doctrine. But consider the implications of such theological immunity, in view of the interrelatedness of all theological doctrines. Such a stance would seem to be tantamount to a refusal to articulate or elaborate any theological doctrine apart from what has already come to be accepted as revealed in scripture and tradition. I have heard it argued with respect to the subordination of women, for example, that if scripture is marked by patriarchy and female subordination, God must have wanted it that way. Moreover, God may appropriately be viewed as the supreme patriarch, just as "He" always has been in both scripture and tradition. The argument of this essay will leave little favorable impression upon

[4]Webster's Third New International Dictionary corroborates this point with its second definition for anthropology, namely, "religious teaching about the origin, nature, and destiny of man (sic) from the perspective of his (sic) relation to God."

those who see matters so. It is my view that scripture and tradition are hardly all-sufficient sources for Christian theology. In fact, neither those whose witness has become scripture nor the formulators of tradition were ever themselves so constrained by received tradition.

Let me be clear that this essay does not attempt to develop a full-fledged theological anthropology. I have a more limited and more critical objective--to argue for the reformulation of Christian theology in light of the moral and ethical failures of theological anthropology. Socrates maintained that we should follow the argument where it leads, and I agree, but the argument I am making leads where few Christians seem prepared to go! We have come to a fork in the road. One way follows the argument toward a major reformulation of Christian theology. The other way dead-ends, or simply circles back upon itself. We are faced with a decision of profoundly moral, and ethical significance. We must ask ourselves whether it is acceptable to hold to any theological view irrespective of its implications for the ordering of human life.[5]

As previously noted, David Kelsey concludes from his discussion of the classic formulations of theological anthropology by Augustine and Aquinas, "One has to ask whether it is moral to hold a [theological] view that has caused so much human anguish." In the view taken here, it is not. Nor does it seem moral to hold to any other theological view whose effect upon human existence is apparently negative, in part or as a whole. A negative effect may be one that distorts, diminishes, trivializes, inflates, frustrates, abuses, impairs, estranges, isolates, and/or polarizes, human beings in their self-understanding and relationship with one another. Theology matters, and good theology contributes to a proper social ordering and an appropriate human flourishing.

This is not to say that the <u>only</u> proper concern of Christian theology is human existence. It is to say that human existence is <u>always and inescapably</u> a proper concern of Christian theology. We cannot responsibly "do" theology without regard for its implications for human existence. Of course, we cannot responsibly "do" theology without regard for the rest of existence, either. Theological anthropology need not be, and in my view should never be, anthropocentric. But insofar as theological anthropology is about human beings, it must be concerned about their good. Christians have every reason to believe that God desires their good, and the good of all others, indeed the good of all creation. The questions that theological anthropology must address have to do with what it is to be human, and what it is that constitutes the human good. There is much that

---

[5]The reformulation of theology, more or less along the lines to be suggested here, is also an intellectual necessity. I am in substantial agreement with the well-known scientist and theologian, Arthur Peacocke, both in his specific proposals for theological reformulation and in his more general assessment of the current state of church theology: "There is an increasingly alarming dissonance between the language of devotion, liturgies and doctrine and what people perceive themselves to be, and to be becoming, in the light of the cognitive science and in the world described by the 'historical' sciences (cosmology, geology, biology) in the 'epic of evolution'. . . We require an open, revisable, exploratory, radical (dare I say it?) liberal theology. This may well be unfashionable among Christians who seem everywhere to be retreating into their fortresses of classical Protestant Evangelicalism, traditional (Anglo-)Catholicism and/or so-called 'biblical theology'. Nevertheless, transition to such a theology is, in my view, actually *unavoidable* if Christians in the West and, I suspect, eventually elsewhere are not to degenerate in the next millennium into an esoteric society internally communing with itself and thereby failing to be the transmitter of its 'good news' (the evangel) to the universal (*catholicos*) world" ("Science and the Future of Theology--Critical Issues," *Reflections*, Center of Theological Inquiry, Autumn 2000, Volume 3, pp. 40-41).

scripture and tradition have to say by way of answers to these questions. However, the particular significance of theological anthropology for Christian theology as a whole derives from the fact that any adequate formulation of the human condition and the human good requires us to take into consideration the full range of human experience and human knowledge as data for theology.

APPROPRIATING THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

Nowhere have the shortcomings--indeed, the moral failures--of classical theological anthropology and Christian theology in general been more clearly and compellingly exposed than in the work of the feminist theologians. Feminist theologians have contributed many insights to contemporary theological work, but perhaps above all they have contributed their experience. That is to say, they have contributed their experience as female rather than male, as subordinate rather than dominant, as often abused or oppressed rather than abusive or in control, as preoccupied with trivialities rather than engaged in master projects, and so on. Feminists, including feminist theologians, have contributed enormously to our understanding of what it means to be human, as well as what it means to be de-humanized. Methodologically, they have convincingly argued the necessity of human experience--their own human experience, but also the experience of all human beings--as an indispensable datum of theology. Moreover, they have made the case that the exclusion of experience as a source of theological reflection is a act of ideological hegemony. As theologian Mary Pellauer has put it, "As a feminist theologian, I claim that the extent to which any theology obscures its experiential base is the extent to which it participates in patriarchy."[6]

There are reasons, in other words, why experience is often excluded as a source of theological reflection and knowledge, and those reasons have to do with the maintenance and legitimation of an existing social order. The notably distinguishing feature of that social order, for Pellauer, is patriarchy. In my own experience, theology also functions to maintain other forms of social and political hegemony. Most often this is done in subtle, perhaps even unwitting, ways. Those in charge of the organs of decision-making and communication of virtually any religious organization can be counted on to employ theology in ways that tap into shared traditions and understandings. We may even expect this of them and commend them for it. When they do so, however, those in charge are also providing for their own justification and legitimation as holders of power. That is to say, those who hold power typically also possess the ideological means to legitimate their power. For that reason, power relationships usually need to be changed in order to effect social and theological change, as feminist theologians have clearly recognized (ergo, the need for women clergy).

Sometimes theology is used in what seem to be deliberately invidious ways. The Presbyterian Lay Committee is one of a number of politically and socially right-wing organizations that uses

---

[6]"Violence Against Women: The Theological Dimension," *Christianity and Crisis*, May 30, 1983, p. 206. Cf. Anne O'Hara Graff: "Today the exploration of women's experience is a critical corrective and constructive element within the revelatory creative movement of tradition itself. . . . [T]he resource of women's experience will highlight the systemic distortions of Scripture and the multiple theological traditions that have done harm to women." Graff, editor, IN THE EMBRACE OF GOD: FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY (Maryknoll, NY: Obis Books, 1995), pp.83-84.

theology, including the traditional creeds and its own version of orthodoxy, to attack, ridicule, marginalize, and exclude those whose theological and/or social perspectives call for a way of being Christian that is inclusive with respect to sexual orientation, fully respectful of other faith traditions, politically liberal, theologically innovative, and/or critical of capitalism and nationalism as well as patriarchy. Such use of theology is profoundly immoral, whether or not it bears epistemological scrutiny on its own terms--that is, whether or not it is a faithful articulation of what it regards to be its inherited and historically legitimated tradition. It should be no surprise that the Presbyterian Lay Committee leadership is utterly disdainful of human experience as a normative resource for theology.

A WORD ABOUT EXPERIENCE

Before proceeding, let me acknowledge that the appeal to human experience as a normative resource for theology is not unproblematic. Critics of this appeal want to know, Whose experiences? Which or what kind of experiences? Some critics are downright contemptuous of the idea that human experience could count for so much. One may hear the sarcastic rebuttal, "You mean my experience of indigestion tells me something about God?" In fact, I do mean something akin to that. The experience of indigestion is a very human experience, an experience of discomfort and vulnerability and potential weakness. It may be an intimation of finitude if not mortality. It may also be an experience of consequence--what did you last have to eat? It may be an experience of self-abuse--how have you been spending your time? What stresses and strains are you putting on yourself? Or it may be an experience of mistreatment by others--what is your boss, or your spouse, doing to you? To what pressures or conflicts are they subjecting you? I would hardly claim that any individual experience *ipso facto* merits elevation to universal truth about the human condition, but I would claim that an adequate understanding of what it means to be human must not, *ipso facto*, exclude any experience of any one. Most traditional theology has not only been dismissive of experience, it has also tended to regard bodily existence in a negative light, and thus been particularly dismissive of bodily experience. To know what it means to be human is to know whatever it is that human beings experience as a matter of being human.

I will not attempt here to provide a full definition, description, or analysis of what qualifies as human experience. I want it to be clear, however, that I have no intention of reifying experience, of turning it into some kind of abstract reality. I recognize, for example, that there is no such thing as "women's experience," or "the black experience," or "the Christian experience", understood in singular terms. Certain kinds of experiences may be common to women, to African Americans, or to Christians, but all experiences are themselves apprehended in ways that are conditioned by circumstance, time, and place. A longer essay might beg for some kind of phenomenology of potentially religiously significant experience. I will simply note my agreement with theologian Bernard Meland and Christian bioethicist Charles Birch. Meland notes that "Experience is the primal source of all awareness."[7] Birch observes, "My experiences are the most real thing about

[7] THE REALITIES OF FAITH (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 208.

me."[8] It is not evident to me that we can claim to know anything apart from experience. This hardly means that there is no place in Christianity for revelation. It simply means that whatever is communicated to us about life and the world and God, whether it be the bodily feeling of indigestion or the knowledge of experimental science or the gift of revelation, comes to us through experience. There is no Christian theology that does not depend upon human experience as a resource for theological reflection. There are only Christian theologies that deny that they do.[9]

Those Christian theologies that deny indebtedness to human experience tend to be de-humanizing, if only because they communicate an attitude of depreciation of human experience,[10] at least insofar as that experience brings to awareness phenomena that do not fit conveniently into the framework of their theologically legitimated social world. We have already seen that a Christian theology that adheres to its received tradition and thereby regards the male experience as normative human experience imposes a judgment upon women that clearly de-values their way of being in the world.[11] Other examples: 1) a Christian theology that adheres to its received tradition and thereby recognizes as normatively human only those expressions of human sexuality that are heterosexual implicitly if not explicitly depreciates the experience that one human being may have of sexual attraction to another human being of the same gender; 2) a Christian theology that adheres to its received tradition and thereby recognizes as legitimately Christian only those who

---

[8]LIBERATING LIFE, Ed. by Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 59.

[9]I am in basic agreement with theologian Sallie McFague when she writes: "To claim that experience is the primary category is not, however, to say that religious experience is the basic criterion for a Christian theology or that we experience apart from or outside formative linguistic communities: it is only to say that all our texts, including Scripture and the classics of the theological tradition, are 'sedimentations' of interpreted experience." MODELS OF GOD: THEOLOGY FOR AN ECOLOGICAL, NUCLEAR AGE (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 42.

[10]Feminist theologians "are suspicious of the false abstractions and overly rationalistic conceptualizations of traditional theologies. Out of their experience of oppression they recognize the suppression of experience in much theological thinking which often also implies an unwholesome separation of theology from a truly transforming and life-giving spirituality." Ursula King, "Voices of protest and promise: Women's studies in religion, the impact of the feminist critique on the study of religion," *Studies in Religion 23* (1994): 322.

[11] Cf. Augustine: "I do not see what other help woman would be to man if the purpose of generating was eliminated." *On Genesis According to the Letter 9-7* (Vienna: *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*, 1866), 28:275. Cf. also Aquinas: "Woman was made to be a help to man. But she was not fitted to be a help to man except in generation, because another man would prove a more effective help in anything else" *(Summa Theologica* I, q. 92, a. 1); Martin Luther: "In paradise, woman would have been a help for a duty only" [i.e., procreation]. "But now she is also, and for the greater part at that, an antidote and a medicine; we can hardly speak of her without a feeling of shame, and surely we can not make use of her without shame" (*Lectures on Genesis*, in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works* I, [St. Louis, 1958], p. 115). Karl Barth, like Calvin but unlike Luther, resisted attributing any ontological inferiority to woman but, like both Calvin and Luther, clearly regarded woman as subordinate: "The command of God will always point man to his position and woman to hers. In every situation, in face of every task and in every conversation, their functions and possibilities, when they are obedient to the command, will be distinctive and diverse, and will never be inter-changeable. . . Why should not woman be the second in sequence, but only in sequence? What other choice has she, seeing she can be nothing at all apart from this sequence and her place within it?" (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III, Part 4 [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961], pp. 151, 171).

believe in a virgin birth, a bodily resurrection, an empty tomb, an ontologically unique Jesus, an economic Trinity, a definitive apostolic tradition, and/or a self-conscious afterlife tends to marginalize if not excommunicate and anathematize those Christians whose life experiences and the knowledge gained from them have made it not only theologically unnecessary but also impossible for them to believe some or all such things.

A critic might say, "All well and good. That is just how it should be. People with aberrant experiences and beliefs and practices should not be accorded equal standing. Their experiences should be depreciated, not honored. If they are unrepentant, if they will not recant, then they must be marginalized for the sake of society as a whole." Such a response is gratuitously self-serving. What evidence is there that the well-being of the whole requires the rejection of some part? This is certainly not how Jesus regarded the outcast, or how Paul imagined the church as the body of Christ (cf. I Cor. 12:12-31).

It is at least incumbent upon the critic who bears so little sympathy for the circumstance of the "other" to bear the burden of proof for justifying dismissal of other human beings and their experiences. But of course, those who find themselves in accord with the dominant ideology, the received orthodoxy, the prevailing theological presumptions and values, typically see no need to bear any burden of proof for their rejection of counter-experiences and perspectives. There is the rub. Some people's experiences are privileged over others. I would simply claim that from within a Christian theological perspective, this is clearly not how it should be. Prevailing views, received traditions, entrenched orthodoxies, have a rightful claim upon our attention. They should never be simply discarded. But they have no privileged claim to the truth. There must be no *a priori* presumption that they represent what is best for human flourishing. Christian theology is always a work in progress, always provisional, because we never get it completely right. In fact, we often get it substantially wrong.[12]

It is long past time for Christian theologians to become self-conscious about the fact that they are not simply engaged in an effort to speak the truth about the way things are with life, the world, and God. They are also inescapably engaged in an activity of ideological significance. Christian theology is not a value-neutral activity, nor can Christian theologians claim that because they are seeking to give expression to the ultimate truth their work is immune to "cultural taint." To be human is to be fallible subject of time, place, and circumstance. It is also to be interested, to sense that one has a stake in the outcome of one's labors. As obvious and incontrovertible as this may be, however, most theologians fail to demonstrate the degree of tentativeness and self-criticism that one would expect in consequence of this realization. I have been struck in recent years by how quick critics of the Jesus Seminar are to note the specks of self-serving validation in the JS scholars' eyes, but do not seem to be aware of the logs of scholarly pride and intellectual

[12]Cases in point: The prophetic critique of Judah and Israel during the period after the collapse of the Davidic monarchy up to and beyond the Babylonian captivity; Jesus' rejection by the politico-religious leaders of his day; the Roman Catholic Church during the periods of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Protestant Reformation; the historical legacy of Christian anti-Semitism; Luther and the Peasant's Revolt; Calvin's Geneva and Servetus; the Salem witch trials; slavery; the continuing subordination of women; the condemnation and/or exclusion of homosexuals.

hegemony in their own. In any event, few theologians seem to recognize that one of the most important ways to test the validity of their theological claims is to explore the implications of those claims for the flourishing of human beings. Good theology must be not only intellectually coherent and compelling, given its sources of authority. Good theology must also be conducive to healthy human existence.

This is to say that a good part of the discussion about theological anthropology, and about Christian theology in general, must be about what constitutes the good life--both the individual good life and the common good. If one believes that the subordination of women to men is a good thing, or at least not a bad thing--to stick with our most obvious example-- then there is little reason to take seriously the feminist critique of patriarchy. But if one believes that the subordination of women to men is an evil, then it would be immoral to continue to tolerate theological ideas, systems, and symbols that contribute to the ideology of legitimation of such subordination.

TWO TASKS OF THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Theological anthropology lies at the fulcrum of contemporary theological debates. And it is faced with two tasks that have not been much emphasized in the past. First, judgments must be made about what it means to be human, and to be human in the best possible way. Traditionally, Christian theology has focused its attention on sin as the existential human condition. This has led to a kind of theological reductionism in which all that transpires between God and human beings is regarded as remedy for sin. It has also led to a truncated and distorted view of what it means to be human. Feminists recognize that this distortion has placed a particular burden upon women, inasmuch as they have been viewed as the descendants of Eve, the archtypal female, who first succumbed to the Tempter's wiles. A distorted view of what it means to be human takes it toll on men, as well, inasmuch as they have been socialized and acculturated in ways that deny, denigrate, or repress--and thus cause them to be estranged from--their feminine side. The human condition is surely problematic, and we cannot begin to fathom what is problematic about our condition without the idea of sin. The task of discerning what it means to be human must not be undertaken without appropriation of past theological wisdom, including the resources of scripture and tradition. But it is a task that can hardly be accomplished without recourse to other sources of knowledge, insight, and understanding. Human reason must be employed, human experience must be taken seriously and more fully explored, human knowledge attained through the physical and social sciences--and through all other critical intellectual disciplines--must be widely surveyed.

Many Christian voices note, in rejoinder to this sort of claim, that sin is hardly over-stressed in most churches today, even if it was so a generation or two ago. I agree with those who believe we need to recapture a vital sense of the reality of sin. But I do not believe that most Christian talk about sin is likely to be taken seriously in most churches today. One may find a vivid sense of sin among the less well-educated and those of lower socio-economic status, for many of whom it seems to validate their disadvantaged circumstances, but sin is less central to the self-understanding of most of our fellow citizens. It is too easy to dismiss talk about sin precisely because it is usually presented in rather simplistic, dogmatic terms, not as part of a larger, more

realistic and more complete account of the human condition.

A second major task for a contemporary theological anthropology is to discern which theological formulations are congruent with, and supportive of, the forms of human self-understanding that are judged to be truest to life, and most conducive to healthy individual and communal human existence. Those theological formulations that appear to function as legitimation and justification for forms of social order and relationship that frustrate or destroy healthy human existence must be abandoned. Healthy human existence must be understood sufficiently broadly, however, to be seen in the context of the whole of existence. We are creatures who share our creaturehood and our habitat with a great host of other kinds of creatures, as well as other living and non-living things upon which our lives, health, and well-being depend. Moreover, whatever superior value we may claim for ourselves as human beings vis-a-vis the rest of creation, every other part of creation nevertheless possesses an intrinsic value of its own. It is *hubris* to think of ourselves as the pinnacle and culmination of creation, as if God is finished creating and has nothing further to bring into being. Creation needs to be seen as an on-going process, of which as an outcome human beings are but state-of-the-art. A healthy human existence is not determinable without regard for the whole of existence, of which it remains but a part.

WARRANTING THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The theological method that I am proposing for theological anthropology, and thereby for all theology, does not deny the value of past theological methods, nor does it discount the insights of scripture and tradition. It simply refuses to discount every other source of knowledge and understanding about the human condition, its origins, nature, and destiny. It particular, it refuses to regard human experience as anything less than the means by which human beings come to know all that can be known. The sources of authority for theology are as many as the sources of knowledge about our life, the world, and God. I would not deny that scripture and tradition represent important touchstones for all Christian theology. I would underline, however, that they are fallible touchstones, and not all-sufficient. There is much that they cannot tell us about ourselves and our world.

This proposal for a creative, constructive, empirically-based theological anthropology is not wedded to traditional authority. In that respect it takes more seriously than traditional theologies the sovereignty of God. Scripture and tradition have no monopoly on the truth or knowledge of God. The experience of God, the revelation of God, the presence of God can be mediated to human beings in virtually any place, time, or circumstance. Who is to say when, where, and how this happens? The value of any scripture or tradition is at least this, that it may guide our perceptions and inform our judgments in such matters. Scripture and tradition bear time-tested witness to others' experiences of the reality of God in their lives and in the world. Surely it would be foolish to disregard such witness of others to the divine in their midst. Nonetheless, there is no definitive source of judgment for discriminating among all events those ways in which God is revealed, experienced, known. Even the witness of scripture and tradition, as we have already seen, is conditioned upon the historical and cultural circumstances, as well as the ideological interests, of its originators and interpreters.

Does this seem like a formula for a kind of theological anarchy? Well, it seems to me that is already what we have and it is time we begin to think more clearly about why it is so and why it may necessarily remain so, at least for the foreseeable future. The only way Christianity ever attained anything approaching doctrinal unity was through the alliance of the Church with the Roman Empire. We now live in a democratic, pluralistic society, in an increasingly pluralistic if not always democratic world. Many philosophers, like Alasdair MacIntyre,[13] as well as theologians, like Stanley Hauerwas,[14] decry the dissolution of those communities and traditions that have served to engender those values and virtues that have constituted what we call a way of life. However, they are not able to mount arguments sufficient to persuade large numbers of fellow citizens to accept their delineation of the values and virtues that we need. Under current historical and cultural conditions, the attainment of even a formal unity of theological conviction among Christians would require the imposition of an authoritarian regime.

It does seem true, however, that under current historical and cultural conditions a wider consensus can sometimes be attained regarding matters of order or practice than regarding matters of doctrine or belief. Representatives of most of the major religious traditions of the world, for example, have recently signed agreement to "The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic,"[15] though one would never expect them to approach unity of religious doctrine. In thousands of local communities around the country scores of Christians (and non-Christians) who might never think of worshiping in one another's congregations gladly get together to build a Habitat for Humanity house. With respect to certain issues, at least, there does seem to be a fair amount of agreement concerning what is required for human flourishing.

On the other hand, my claim that theological anthropology is the fulcrum for most Christian theology seems to be borne out by the deep cultural divide that is now tearing at the fabric of many religious communities in the United States today. Sociologist of religion James Davison Hunter has written of this divide in terms of the "culture wars".[16] One does not have to accept all of his analysis to recognize that in fact Christians are divided within denominations, as much or more than across denominations, by issues having centrally to do with what it means to be human--issues like abortion, sexual morality, homosexuality, assisted suicide, gender roles. The deep

---

[13]AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[14]VISION AND VIRTUE: ESSAYS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICAL REFLECTION (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1974); CHARACTER AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: A STUDY IN THEOLOGICAL ETHICS (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975);TRUTHFULNESS AND TRAGEDY: FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

[15]A GLOBAL ETHIC: THE DECLARATION OF THE PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS, ed. by Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel (New York: Continuum, 1993). We should also note that in 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 50th anniversary of which was recently observed by a number of Christian denominations.

[16]CULTURE WARS: THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE AMERICA (New York: Basic Books, HarperCollins, 1991).

divisions that exist within Christianity in our society today are also evident at the level of ideology. The interpretation and authority of scripture, in particular, is implicated in all the "morality" debates. As already noted, certain defenders of theological tradition also brandish the creeds and the essential tenets of the faith as weapons in the war against those who are engaged in a less traditional and less authoritarian appropriation of scripture and moral teaching. If there were not such disagreement about what it means to be human, and to be human in the best possible way, the depth and intensity of debate and mutual recrimination over other theological disagreements would surely be lessened.

I have not tried to hide my own sympathies respecting this cultural battle, but I would not want to be too closely identified with any particular group or ideology. I often find that there is no identifiable party with whom I can be partisan on a particular issue. Though I am taking fundamental issue with those who do not recognize the ideological nature of belief systems, I often find that even those who recognize the ideological nature of such systems, and the ways in which human interests are invariably implicated in such systems, do not go far enough in their critiques. To try to make clear what I mean, let me identity some of the points at which I believe traditional theology must undergo substantial revision or reformulation. I will focus mainly on certain theological teachings that are closely associated with the doctrine of humankind.

AGENDA FOR THEOLOGICAL REFORMULATION

1) Any theological anthropology that implicitly or explicitly translates gender differences into inequality in power, status, or value must be revised or rejected. Implicit inequality is evident whenever "man" or "male existence" is treated as normative, including whenever appeals to human experience or behavior draw disproportionately upon the gendered experience of males. Explicit inequality has already been identified in major sources of the tradition. Various exegetical moves have been taken to counter the pervasive patriarchal perspective in the scriptures, e.g., noting that human beings are created "male and female" in the image of God (Gen. 1: 27), and that the identification of "woman" as "helpmate" to "man" (Gen. 2:18) does not necessarily imply subordination inasmuch as the same Hebrew word is used elsewhere to speak of God. Such steps, though appropriate and valuable, only begin to alter fundamental perceptions about hierarchical relationships.

The theological language of the church must be changed if it is not to continue to reinforce patterns of male dominance. That is to say, God, in whose image humankind has been created, must no longer be viewed as supreme male patriarch. As long as language about God is exclusively or predominantly male gendered, male existence and experience will be valorized above that of females. This is not just a matter of watching our pronouns, avoiding "he," "him," and "his" in reference to God. Terms like "Father," "Master," "Lord," and "King" are all patriarchal appellations for God. If they are retained, they will continue to legitimate a view of the social order that is male-dominant--unless comparable female imagery is also employed to an equivalent extent. Nowhere will it be more difficult to make the necessary changes than in the hymnody and classical musical tradition of the Church. Major church denominations have made some progress along these lines, but they have simultaneously directed resources toward the so-

called liturgical renewal movement, an essentially conservative effort that has promoted worship forms and language that reinforce patriarchal conceptions of God.

2) Christians must revise their doctrine of sin. In the first place, the idea of original sin is unintelligible to most people today. That does not make it wrong, but it does call into question its usefulness and effect. If nothing else, this idea corroborates a view of human beings that is basically negative. In particular, it has had the effect of denigrating bodily existence. For one thing, *the* original sin of Eve has often been viewed as a capitulation to appetite. And for another, the transmission of original sin has been understood to occur at conception, the consequence of sexual intercourse. Have no illusions that human sexuality, and bodily existence in general, would be unproblematic were it not for the idea of original sin. It does seem to be the case, however, that this idea was given determinative shape and form by someone--Augustine--who had more than his share of sexual problems. How unfortunate that his interpretation of his own experience became so normative for the Western Christian world.

The Christian doctrine of sin would need revision, however, even were it not for the idea of original sin. The problem with the doctrine is at least two-fold: a) It has been mythologized into a cosmology. Due to individual human sin, all of existence is taken to be permeated with sin. This mythology of sin attributes too much responsibility and too much power to human beings. Sin has often been the concept indiscriminately used to account for the apparent imperfections of the natural world, as if droughts, firestorms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and disease would never have occurred without human sin. b) Sin has also been taken to be *the* defining feature of the human condition, especially once original sin occurs. Much Christian theology has obscured the fact that the centrally defining fact of the human condition is finitude. Though human beings are distinct from other creatures, they are nonetheless creatures. That is to say, human beings have a Creator, they are not self-created. Whatever creative powers they may possess, inasmuch as they have been created in the image of God, those powers have limits.

The finitude of human beings is expressed in the Adamic myth of creation, first, in that human beings are created mortal, second, in that "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18), and third, in that there is fruit of which they are not to partake. There are physical, social, and moral conditions or limits on human existence. Once Adam and Eve violate God's command by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they are forced out of the garden, lest they "take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (Gen. 3:22). When Adam and Eve succumb to the serpent's temptation, they commit an act that signals more than disobedience, a strictly moral violation. It may be an act of concupiscence, a succumbing to appetite. Even more so, however, it is an act of "over-reaching," an act that promises to gain them knowledge they are not to have. Adam and Eve commit an act of self-assertion, or pride. It has been said that "Humility is to make a right estimate of self."[17] Adam and Eve lack such humility in their rejection of their limitations. Having shown themselves capable of rejecting the limits implied in God's command against eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God recognizes that they are capable of rejecting the limits of their mortality as well. Those limits must be preserved, and

[17]Attributed to Charles Haddon Spurgeon

so they must leave the garden.

The Yahwist author to whom we owe the Adamic creation myth did not stand alone among the biblical witnesses to the human condition. The ancient Hebrew prophet whom we call Second Isaiah lamented, "All people are grass" (Isa. 40:6). One of the psalmists observes that "The days of our life . . . are soon gone, and we fly away" (Ps. 90:10). The sage of Ecclesiastes observes, "For the fate of humans and he fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity" (Eccl. 3:19). The author of Ecclesiastes denies neither the good of human existence nor the sovereignty of God. He is clearly agnostic about matters of human destiny, however. But the main thrust of his wisdom is to warn against vain striving, "a chasing after wind" (2:11). Shakespeare had it right: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"[18] Say all you want about what is special, distinctive, exceptional about human existence. The bottom line is that we are dust, and to dust we shall return (Gen. 3:19).

I would maintain that the most serious failure of human beings is the failure to come to terms with their own finitude. This lies at the root of all that we call sin, and there is no remedy for it apart from acceptance of the fact that we are human and that only God is God. The human rejection of human limits is a kind of self-idolatry. The greatest crimes against humanity have been committed by those who have over-reached their powers, who have sought a kind of immortality, who have been willing to go to almost any lengths to assert themselves against the world. One may think of Hitler and the ideology of the *Übermensch*. One may think of all the unholy holy wars of human history. One may think of inquisitions and crusades, of ethnic cleansings and blood revenge. One may think of Jim Jones and Jonestown, of Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City bombing. It is not necessarily people of the most despicable character, or the most perverse morality, who commit the greatest crimes. It is people who are not constrained by their own finitude.[19]

It is perhaps worth noting that social surveys, at least in the United States, consistently show that a very high proportion of the population believes in some kind of life after death. This is true of even the least orthodox. A belief in an afterlife is surely one means by which human beings attempt to come to terms with the mortality of their earthly existence. Whether it is a well-grounded belief, or merely wishful thinking, we should take this as an important clue about the human condition. A Christian theological anthropology that does not address the fact of human finitude in all its dimensions invites other beliefs, ideologies, and behaviors by which human beings will seek to satisfy their need to become reconciled to the limits of their existence.

The need for an appropriate sense of limits is all the more important as our world gets "smaller,"

---

[18]William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii, lines 317ff.

[19]Ernest Becker, in his Pulitzer-prize winning book, THE DENIAL OF DEATH, provides additional perspective on the potential negative consequences of our human condition with his sobering psychological interpretation of the human resistance to finitude and mortality. (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan, 1973).

as we come to live in closer quarters with one another, and as we begin to deal with the fact that our earthly habitat does not provide us unlimited or totally renewable resources. It has never been particularly healthy for human beings to consume without restraint, or to act without regard for others. Now, self-indulgence is not only hazardous to individual health and character, and self-aggrandizement is not only an imposition upon community, these are threats to continued human survival. An appropriate sense of human finitude engenders a proper respect for other human beings and the rest of creation, as well as an appropriate ethic of consumption. As Adam was directed to "till and keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15), so we are responsible for the stewardship of the earth, for its own sake (or for God's sake), not just for our own. Surely the awareness of finitude provides a more compelling motivation for people to exercise self-restraint in order to act responsibly toward one another and toward their environment than the awareness of sinfulness.

3) A more adequate Christian theological anthropology would also abandon the doctrine of the "Fall". In the first place, the Genesis creation accounts do not necessitate such a doctrine. Jews share these accounts with Christians, but do not have such a doctrine. The Quran has its own version of the Adamic myth, but Islam has no doctrine of the Fall. In the second place, the doctrine of the Fall, as already intimated, attributes too much responsibility and power to human beings. The doctrine does have the virtue of implicating human action in the degradation of the global environment. Moreover, this doctrine links human destiny with the destiny of the natural world. Nonetheless, there is a kind of perverse arrogance in the assumption that the disobedience of two human beings, or even the entire human race, accounts for all that appears chaotic and disordered throughout the cosmos. The doctrine of the Fall is implicitly anthropocentric. It obscures our vision of the continuing intrinsic goodness of creation. It works against a robust appreciation for all in creation that does not necessarily serve human purposes.

In the third place, the doctrine of the Fall is implicated in notions of human depravity that grossly devalue human experience, contribute to overly negative views of other human beings, and--ironically--diminish the sense of responsibility human beings have for the state of their world. The Christian tradition has not been very successful in trying to describe how the image of God is and is not obliterated in humankind by the Fall. The practical result of the doctrine of the Fall is to diminish expectations--after all, what can you expect from the utterly depraved! But if we are not utterly depraved, then we had better get serious about the ways in which our actions degrade the lives of others, human and non-human, as well as the environment we share. We had better employ our rational and moral energies to correct abuses resulting from human heedlessness, even while we acknowledge the need to accept the limits to which other beings and nature can be enlisted for our purposes or conformed to our ideals.

Fourth, even if the doctrine of the Fall were not beset by moral problems, it fails as a piece of historical fiction. As Arthur Peacocke notes, "Human beings seem to be 'rising beasts' rather than 'fallen angels'. There is no evidence for a past paradaisal, fully integrated, harmonious, virtuous existence of *homo sapiens* . . ." Moreover, "Death of the individual is now seen as part of God's created processes whereby the living creatures preceding humanity and humanity itself have

come into existence. So how can 'the wages of sin' be 'death'?"[20] That is to say, there is no basis for attributing to some prior event in human history a fundamental change in the human condition that must become the focal point for the Christian doctrine of redemption. To the contrary, as I have already note, the fundamental fact of human finitude and death occasions much that we regard as sin.

4) The anthropocentric view of human beings, while doing little to encourage a sense of responsibility for the rest of creation, seems to have provided support for the idea of human domination over nature. Indeed, the *imago Dei* idea is often assumed to express the analogous relationships of God's dominion over humankind and humankind's dominion over the rest of our natural world. Would a more modest, less anthropocentric, view of humankind's relationship to the natural world find its analogue in a more modest, less omnipotent, view of divine sovereignty? Perhaps so, and just as well. Prevailing notions of divine omnipotence owe too much to Aristotle and Aquinas. God as "unmoved mover" is God as detached, removed, remote, unaffected by the creation. The biblical view of God, however, is otherwise. God is vulnerable to regret, and "repents" of the creation of humankind (Gen. 6:7). God grieves over the perversity of humankind (Ps. 78:40; Isa. 54:6), and is compassionate toward faithless Israel (Hos. 11:8). Far from being impassive, God can be filled with jealous anger (cf. Deutr. 32:22; Hos. 8:5; Isa. 65:5), and God abides in steadfast love (cf. Ps. 136; Jer. 9:24; Joel 2:13). Granted, the biblical view of God can be highly anthropomorphic, and there is danger in simply viewing God as the human being writ large. Nonetheless, Christian theology today is finding it necessary to re-think old orthodoxies on this question. If, as Christians proclaim, God's power has been pre-eminently manifest in love--a suffering love, no less--then notions of divine omnipotence that attribute impassivity, invulnerability, and coercive power to God are impoverished and inadequate.

The recognition that perhaps divine sovereignty is not to be understood in terms of arbitrary, non-contingent force provides an opening to the view, best articulated by process theology, that in some respect God may be subject to material existence. It would be too large an undertaking to provide an account here of process theology's understanding of God. Let it be enough to say that a reformulated theology of divine sovereignty will complement a reformulated theological anthropology as outlined above. There is that in the world that human beings experience as chaos and disorder. Insofar as such chaos and disorder have been important factors in human suffering, they have been regarded as forms of natural evil. In traditional theology, such natural evil has been treated as evidence of the cosmic consequences of the Fall. In other words, such evil has been attributable to human sin. If, as proposed above, we abandon the doctrine of the Fall, then how do we account for natural evil? Within a traditional theological framework, God must be responsible. Within a process view, however, one may think of such natural evil precisely as the manifestation of chaos and disorder within an otherwise seemingly ordered universe. Why does God allow such chaos and disorder? The question will only be asked by those who assume that God has the power to do otherwise. But if God is not arbitrarily omnipotent over material existence, and if creation is an on-going process, then such chaos and disorder may be viewed as evidences that God is still engaged in the creative process. Creation remains to be perfected.

---

[20]Op. cit., pp. 38, 39

Perhaps it will never be perfected, from our human perspective. Perhaps suffering will remain an intrinsic and inescapable feature of all sentient existence. The point is, neither human beings nor God must be blamed for all the suffering that we do not inflict upon ourselves.

5) Traditional Christian theology, in its attempt to secure the sovereignty and omnipotence of God, also invented the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Here is a doctrine with roots that are clearly post-biblical, the first evidence for such a doctrine dating from the 2nd century C. E. In the biblical view, found in Genesis 1, in the earlier writings of many of the prophets and psalmists, and in such wisdom literature as Job, there existed a primeval watery chaos, out of which God effects the creation.[21] The *ex nihilo* doctrine is not only contrary to scripture, it has also had deleterious effects upon human attitudes toward God's creation. It suggests that the work of creation was really not much work at all. As a former parishioner once put it to me, when she took issue with my opposition to nuclear armaments, "If we destroy this world through nuclear war, God can just create another to replace it." In the biblical view, however, creation was a major work, not a magician's hat trick. On the seventh day God rested from this work. Moreover, when God decides to rain judgment upon a world become perverse, God has Noah go to all the trouble of building an ark large enough to save at least a pair of every living animal species. The Noachic flood depicts a temporary return of the primeval, watery chaos out of which God brought the world into being. But God is not willing to go so far as to see any of the creation utterly destroyed.

The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* seriously undermines the sense of God's profound investment in the creation. Biologist and theologian Holmes Rolston III reminds us that the natural world represents "several billion years' worth of creative toil."[22] Anyone who takes seriously the knowledge of geological and evolutionary history can hardly take seriously a doctrine of creation that claims, in effect, that whatever exists exists purely and simply by divine decree. Moreover, the *ex nihilo* doctrine would require us to believe that this is the best of all possible worlds, since God would surely not create less than the best--unless by mistake!

The main point I wish to emphasize, however, is that the creative process is a costly, demanding process. This is true for human beings no less than for God. The work of divine creation is a labor of love. To regard and treat any part of the natural world as if it were dispensable, value-less, easily replaceable, is to show ingratitude and disregard for God's handiwork. The world of human creation bears a more ambiguous aspect. Not all human creations are a blessing, and some are positively monstrous precisely because they are created to destroy. Human creations are to be evaluated in terms of their capacity to enable human flourishing as well as the flourishing of the natural world. With respect to both divine and human labors, we need to recognize that creative work receives both its limits and its possibilities from the conditions of material existence. And we need to recognize that creation is an exacting and time-consuming work. It is far easier to

---

[21]Cf. Bernard Anderson, "Creation," in George Arthur Buttrick, editor, THE INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 725-732; Foster R. McCurley, ANCIENT MYTHS AND BIBLICAL FAITH (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

[22]"Wildlife and Wildlands: A Christian Perspective," in AFTER NATURE'S REVOLT, ed. by Dieter Hessel (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), p. 141.

destroy than to create. We are called to honor all that is good in creation, and not to countenance its destruction. The *ex nihilo* doctrine does little to encourage such a sensibility, indeed, it may even encourage a rather cavalier attitude toward the world that God loves.[23]

6) A major thrust of the theological reformulations I am proposing is a positive revaluation of creation. Christianity has always affirmed the goodness of the original creation, but has often depreciated the value of creation "after the Fall." Like our other beliefs, the attitude we take toward the creation has both theological and ethical significance, as I have been arguing throughout. In the first place, beliefs about creation inform our attitudes and actions toward other human beings. Second, a positive regard for the creation discourages abuse and exploitation and motivates conservation and stewardship of the natural world.

Theologically speaking, our attitudes and actions toward creation are taken to be a reflection of God's disposition toward us and the rest of the world. Unfortunately, much Christian theology has been so focused on the need for redemption that it has neglected and depreciated God's work in creation. It makes an enormous difference whether our theology regards human beings as fundamentally good or fundamentally bad (or someone in between). Our soteriology or theology of redemption does not arise in a vacuum, but must be addressed to the human condition as we understand it. How is it, for Christians, that Jesus the Christ effects our salvation? What is needed in order to redeem us, to restore us to right relationship with God, to empower us to live as children of God?

Here I wish only to note that the dominant understanding of the work of Jesus the Christ has become one of vicarious sacrifice for human sin. Jesus pays the price for our sins by dying on the cross. Historically and culturally it is not hard to see the roots of this understanding in the sacrificial practices of ancient Israel. Similar notions of sacrificial atonement can also be found in many other religious cultures. Nonetheless, such a transactional view of the atonement continues to rest upon ideas of God that exist in serious tension if not outright contradiction with the idea that God is inveterately merciful, forgiving, compassionate, and loving. And this view makes little sense apart from the sort of reductionist, sin-obsessed, theological anthropology rejected here.

The sacrificial work of Jesus is not hereby disregarded. There is in fact ample empirical evidence to claim that human existence is necessarily sustained by acts of suffering and sacrifice, though not by such acts alone. Is it possible to acknowledge that unmerited suffering and sacrifice can be redemptive, reconciling, and transforming, without consenting to the view that God demands such sacrifice in payment for sin? There is ample theological reason to claim that God, as one who loves and cares for us and all creation, shares in this suffering and sacrifice. But it is neither theologically necessary nor theologically edifying to claim that divine forgiveness must be purchased by sacrificial payment for sin. Jesus' life and death can be seen as supreme evidences of his love for God, for humankind, and for the world. The form that Jesus' life and death took, however, is to be understood in terms of the conditions imposed by time and circumstance, not in

---

[23]Cf. my article, "Why Owls Matter, Mosquitoes Bite, and Existence Remains a Mystery: A Case for *Creatio ex Chaos*," Quarterly Review (Winter 1996), pp. 415-425.

terms of divine requirements for settling accounts with the rest of humanity.

7) The particular relevance of the above comments to theological anthropology emerges in contemporary discussions regarding the meaning of that distinctive form of love that Christians call *agape*. Here again we are indebted to feminist scholars and theologians who take exception to the way in which love has been understood by such major theologians as Soren Kierkegaard in THE WORKS OF LOVE,[24] Anders Nygren in AGAPE AND EROS,[25] and Reinhold Niebuhr in LOVE AND JUSTICE[26] as well as many of his other writings. These male theologians tend to define *agape* love as unconditional, uncalculating, self-denying, non-preferential, disinterested, and even disembodied. Love has more the character of a duty than that of a virtue or emotion. As feminists have also noted, it has typically been women more than men who have been expected to practice such love. The ideal of self-denial, or self-sacrifice, has been particularly enjoined upon women in ways that it has not been enjoined upon men.

Christian notions of love as self-denial or self-sacrifice have generally received their legitimation from the example of Jesus. This is especially true insofar as his actions have been interpreted in terms of the motif of "taking up one's cross" in obedience to divine command. Feminist theologians object to the idea that God demanded Jesus' life on the cross. They also take issue with other facets of the view of *agape* love as unconditional, non-preferential, and self-denying. They may claim, correctly, that this is hardly the biblical view of love, nor does it seem to represent anything human. They observe that love is hardly disinterested or non-preferential. Love is not oblivious to relationships and their conditions. Love, though not selfish or self-centered, is not simply self-denying. In short, they object to notions of love that assume self-abnegation or self-immolation as virtuous or good. And they point out that love must be understood in relational terms, beginning with one's relationship to oneself. One can hardly love the other when one does not love oneself. Jesus himself taught that we are to love neighbor *as we love ourselves*, a principle of relationship that is also embodied in the Golden Rule.

Here is another point where the traditional doctrine of humankind needs reformulation because of its excessively negative view of human beings. Many Christians have been taught to think so little of themselves that they have never attained a proper love of self, nor indeed of others. The Epistle of I John declares that we love because God first loved us (4:19). The claim is not simply that love is a transaction and that, having received, we must give in return. The claim is that our capacity to love is conditioned upon the prior love that we have experienced from God. It is that prior love, which we have never been without, that enables us to attain a proper self-love and that thereby enables us to love the other. Moreover, according to I John, we cannot love God, whom we have

---

[24]WORKS OF LOVE: SOME CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS IN THE FORM OF DISCOURSES, trans. by Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, 1962).

[25]AGAPE AND EROS, trans. by Philip S. Watson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, 1969).

[26]LOVE AND JUSTICE: SELECTIONS FROM THE SHORTER WRITINGS OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR, ed. by D. B. Robertson (Cleveland: Meridian Books, World Publishing Company, 1967).

not seen, if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen (4:20). We do not love in general or in the abstract, but in the particular and the concrete.

There is abundant empirical evidence that being deprived of love severely diminishes one's capacity for love. There is also abundant empirical evidence that being treated abusively strongly increases the propensity to inflict abuse on others. In the true economy of *agape* love, all is relational. If we are able to love unconditionally at all, it is only in the sense that we do not require anything in return from some particular object of our love. In this sense there may be an asymmetry to love. We do not love tit-for-tat. But the more encompassing context of love is one of mutuality. Love thrives when and where we are both loved and loving.

CONCLUSION

The ancient Hebrew prophet, Hosea, charged the religious leaders of his day--priests and prophets--with feeding on the sins of the people (Hosea 4:8). They had not done their job of instructing the people, they had not done their job of holding the people to account. They had collaborated in the prevailing culture of greed and exploitation. They had profited from the practice of religion.

It does not take a lot of imagination to understand what Hosea was talking about. The Protestant Reformation received a good part of its impetus from Luther's protest against the Roman Catholic Church's practice of indulgences. The Church and its leaders had constructed a system of beliefs that justified their extortionist policies. They were profiting from the sins of the people. Luther agonized over the question of how to find a gracious God--and when he did, Christianity was permanently changed. But Christianity has never been permanently relieved of the problem that invariably infects all religious ideology, the problem of self-justification and self-legitimation. There are those churches today that make the practice of attending church a ritual of absolution and an act of righteousness, a deed that is weekly enjoined upon the people of the congregation to keep them coming back next Sunday. There are those churches that claim for their sacraments the exclusive means of grace, without which salvation cannot be assured. There are those churches that capitalize on the taste of the members for entertainment, or their propensity for self-indulgence, by providing services that sanction and bless an ethic of consumption or success. The reader may ponder the host of other ways in which today's churches continue to feed on the sins of the people who still frequent their pews and places of worship.

Many Christians today are engaged in a contemporary struggle to find a gracious God--not the God who presides over patriarchal social structures, not the God who demands our self-destruction, not the God who thinks so little of us as creatures that we are obliged to despise and depreciate our embodied existence, not the God who is exacting of full penalty for sin, and not the God who indulges our desires to dominate, exploit, and consume--but the God whose love embraces all of the world in all its imperfect existence and cherishes every individual with equal regard. Many of these Christians have distanced themselves from the Church, because the God they seek, whom the Church has even helped them come to know, is mostly honored in the breach in the congregations they have known. Others have given up on Christianity for good. Still others remain in the Church but wonder how long Christianity can continue without radical theological reformulation.

Many churches, meanwhile, have collaborated in the self-indulgences of a consumer-oriented culture, while others indulge themselves by resting on the laurels of the past.

Of course, most people who remain in the Church are not so anguished about the Church's theology, or its theological anthropology. Those in the more established churches may even see themselves as a faithful remnant, barring the gates against the acids of modernity, battening the hatches against the winds of post-modernity, reclaiming the tradition against the tide of secularity. I know what it is like to be in their shoes. I have come to believe that their shoes are pointed in the wrong direction.

Bishop John Shelby Spong asserts that Christianity must change or die.[27] I fear he is wrong. I fear that Christianity can continue indefinitely without the kinds of substantive theological change that this essay calls for. But I also believe that Christianity will change, as it has changed before. It will not change into anything perfect. It remains to be seen whether it will even change for the better. It will nonetheless change, because the world that the Church and its members inhabit is changing. Can we be more intentional about this change? Can we recognize those ways in which the Church's theology now fails us? Can we respond constructively and creatively as we face the growing realization that we are not served well--even if once we were--by many of the theological constructions of the past? This essay is but one gesture in hope that the good news of God's gracious love, manifest in Jesus whom we call the Christ, will not fall on deaf ears.

[27]WHY CHRISTIANITY MUST CHANGE OR DIE (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998).

AFTERWORD

Initial response within our regional Pastor-Theologian seminar to my original draft of this paper raised several issues, at least one of which deserves specific attention. Prof. Daniel Migliore offered a thoughtful response in which he wondered if perhaps I was attempting in my own way to establish a foundationalist basis for Christian faith. I answered to the effect that I do not find the foundationalist project to be a congenial one, and that I understand my effort to be one of identifying, if not constructing, a provisional Christian theology. On further reflection, it seems to me that more needs to be said.

Key to understanding the theological crux of this essay, as well as the theology of my sermons and virtually all my theological writings, is a kind of dialogical relationship between past and future-present, between that which has been given and that which has been promised. Perhaps I can put the matter most helpfully in the form of two affirmations: 1) The One who is resurrected is the One *who was crucified*; 2) The One who was crucified is the One *who is resurrected*. I will discuss each affirmation in turn.

To say that "the One who is resurrected is the One *who was crucified*" is to point to the fact that God does not raise just anyone from the dead. Whatever else we may say about the "Christ-event," we must recognize that we are talking about something that actually happened within the course of human history. The resurrection is to be seen as a confirmation of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. It is with respect to him, who was crucified about the year 30 C.E., that we proclaim God's resurrecting power. What is at stake in this affirmation is the nature of that which is subject to resurrection. What is it that God affirms? Who is it to whom God says a resounding "Yes" in the resurrection? It is precisely Jesus of Nazareth and those who followed after him.

In my view, it is crucial that Christian theology understand itself to be a reflection upon the life, ministry, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, as well as his resurrection. Against the radical deconstructionists and the Bultmannian existentialists, I would maintain that the early Christian witness to Jesus, above all as we find it in the Synoptic Gospels, preserves for us a portrait of Jesus sufficient for our understanding of his person and work to provide us a model of what it means to live faithfully before God as a person of integrity, justice, and love.

In his book, THE RESPONSIBLE SELF,[28] theologian H. Richard Niebuhr undertook one attempt to describe and explain how Jesus functions symbolically to represent and communicate to us what it means to be responsible before God. More recently, theologian Douglas Ottati, in his book, JESUS CHRIST AND CHRISTIAN VISION,[29] has tackled issues relating to the historical reliability of the Gospels and their portraits of Jesus in relation to the apostolic faith of the Church. Ottati argues that the Gospels do present a reliable portrait of Jesus, and one to which the historic

---

[28]THE RESPONSIBLE SELF: AN ESSAY IN CHRISTIAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY (New York: Harper & Row, 1963)

[29](Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989)

creeds of the Church are broadly responsive and faithful. Niebuhr and Ottati have constructed important arguments, but in each case they fall short. In Niebuhr's case, the social and historical contexts of Jesus' ministry and teaching are not sufficiently evident to provide a model for human action in its larger social dimensions. Ottati may be weak on the same score, but it is his central claim to establish the congruence of the historical Jesus with the Christ of faith, as apprehended in the creeds, that is less than convincing.

I do not claim to have succeeded where Niebuhr and Ottati have failed. My claim is that both Niebuhr and Ottati are correct in finding a presentation of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels that is adequate for Christian faith, but that it is adequate only in dialogical relationship with a critical apprehension of those contemporary circumstances that form the bases for human flourishing and the flourishing of all creation. I would further claim that a critical apprehension of those circumstances that form the bases for such flourishing needs also, at a minimum, to be informed by the broader insights of the biblical tradition, most especially the Old Testament prophets, as well as the experience, practices, and traditions of the Christian churches for the past two millenia. In our day, it may also be incumbent upon us to draw upon the experience, wisdom, and traditions of other religions and cultures to enlarge, enrich, and refine our understanding of the flourishing of human beings and creation.

Nonetheless, I would insist that the central Christian claim, that God was somehow made manifest for the sake of the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, is a claim that must be anchored in history. For this reason I believe the work of the Jesus Seminar and all biblical scholarship that aims to identify what can be known, or reasonably assumed to be the case, regarding the historical Jesus, deserves the most serious consideration. Granted that all such historical investigation involves a fair amount of speculation, and that the conclusions of such research must be taken as tentative and subject to correction and revision. We cannot be indifferent to the fact that Christianity has always centered its faith on what happened in the life, ministry, and death, as well as the resurrection, of an apparently itinerant Palestinian preacher, healer, and teacher named Jesus. We must be more than a little curious why it was in him, and not in some other, that the God whom we worship and believe to be the Creator of the universe became manifest to humankind in such an unparalleled way. And no dogmatic answer to this question can ultimately satisfy. That is to say, we cannot adequately answer this question by resorting to arbitrary theological claims that merely chalk it up to God's doing. There must have been that about him and his circumstances that constituted what the scriptures call "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10). What was it that fitted Jesus to become the "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith (Heb. 12:2)? What was the substance of the "therefore" in the Philippian hymn (Phil. 2:9), the action that preceded God's exaltation of this obedient one? The question is in large part a historical one, and deserves as much of a historical answer as we can provide.

To be a Christian is to be a disciple, a follower, of Jesus who was crucified. To be a Christian is also, however, to belong to the community of those who lay claim in him to resurrection. Here we must ask, what is it that was so powerfully communicated in him, and is continually being made known to us, that overcomes the powers of evil and death? What is the originating vision? What is it that gives life, that restores humanity, that liberates the human spirit, that makes for human and other flourishing? At a very minimum, Christians must regard the resurrection of Jesus to be a

divine disclosure that death does not have the last word. Life, not death, is the ultimate aim of the Creator: in place of the dissolution of defeat and despair, the community of hope and faith; instead of the guilt of betrayal, denial, and abandonment, the love, joy, and peace of continued devotion.

The One who was crucified is also the One who, with his disciples, was resurrected to new life. Christians have always understood this new life to be "in the Spirit." The three cardinal virtues of Christian existence are faith, hope, and love. The fruits of this Christian existence are to be manifest in individual and community life. This Christian existence has been spoken of as "new creation," "new being," "re-birth," "newness of life". The point is that being a Christian is less a matter of making certain affirmations than it is of living by a certain Spirit, a Spirit that gives life (II Cor. 3:6).

Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia, is remembered for saying, "The proof of Easter is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but spirit-filled fellowship." I am sympathetic with this statement, but not entirely in agreement. Full hearts of transformed disciples and spirit-filled fellowship do not prove Easter. There is no proof for Easter as such. I would be more inclined to say that Easter can only be defined in these terms. We would know nothing of Easter were it not for the transformation experienced by Jesus' disciples, and the spirit-filled fellowship of those who came to be known as the people of the Way. Theological affirmations regarding Easter and the resurrection are best understood as second-order reflections upon the experiences of those who have come to be known as Christians because they have found that God has been most profoundly disclosed to them in Jesus, whom they therefore call the Christ, and they are thus called to a new way of being in the world.

It is commonly thought that Christian theology is in service to the truth, the truth about God. I would suggest that insofar as Christian theology is in service to the truth, it is in service to the truth regarding all that God intends for humanity and all creation. In particular, Christian theology is in the service of "doing the truth," which is to say, it is in the service of life, abundant life, liberated life, life that flourishes and gives glory to the Creator. As I explicitly proposed in my Pastor-Theologian paper last year, what we require is a serviceable theology. In other words, we need a theology that is in the service of God's purposes for us and the world. We need a theology that will help to engender those values and virtues, those perceptions and understandings, those commitments and actions, that make for life and all its flourishing. I really do mean to say that an essential and critical criterion for sound theology is whether it contributes positively to the flourishing of human existence and all other existence within the providence of the Creator.

It is perhaps obvious by now that I believe sound Christian theology is Christian insofar as it is anchored to the historical person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, and it is sound insofar as it engenders the flourishing of human life and the creation. But I also mean to say that sound Christian theology is sound insofar as it is anchored to the historical person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, and it is Christian insofar as it engenders the flourishing of human life and the creation. A theology that contributes positively to the flourishing of human and all other existence will at the same time be congruent with the originating vision of Jesus and his disciples. I see these two criteria--the life and ministry of the historical Jesus, and the flourishing of life and creation--as

both complementary and supplementary. Each informs and completes the other. The One through whom life is given to all is the One who gave his life for all, and the One who gave his life for all is the One through whom life is given to all.

This last statement is not intended as a claim of Christian exclusivism, however. I am simply trying to underscore that this approach to Christian theology is rooted in the most central events in the life story of Jesus the Christ, the crucifixion and the resurrection. I also want to add that I do not see how Christian theology can make serious claims about divine incarnation without attending specifically both to the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth and to the material conditions for the flourishing of human and other life. We must attend to the particularities of the historical Jesus, and the particularities of human and other flourishing. To do so, however, is not to suggest that God is to be known only through some certain set of historical particularities.

In this light, let me return to the question of whether mine is a foundationalist approach to Christian theology. Clearly, there is a sense in which I regard Jesus Christ as the foundation stone for Christian faith. There is also a sense in which I treat the material conditions and circumstances of flourishing existence as the bases for theological construction. It should be clear, nonetheless, that I do not regard the historical Jesus as entirely accessible to critical scholarship. Far from it. I have spoken of adequacy, something short of complete reliability, when commenting on both the New Testament Gospel presentations of Jesus and the results of historical Jesus scholarship. The tentativeness of all our knowledge, including knowledge of the past, exhibits the finite conditions of our historical existence. As Paul put it, now "we know only in part" (I Cor. 13:9).

Moreover, we dare not be too confident either about our knowledge regarding the conditions and circumstances most favorable to human and other existence. Human life sometimes flourishes under what would seem to be the most unlikely circumstances, and the same can be said for other forms of existence. Furthermore, the relationship between human ideas and their embodiment in actual existence is far from self-evident. Consequently, we can never be too sure that we know the material implications of theological ideas, or any other forms of thought, for actual human experience and behavior. Many people live lives that are far more eloquent and true than anything they say they believe, while others are able to articulate the profundities of life but cannot seem to master the basics of human decency. All this is to say that, as a criterion of Christian theology, the flourishing of human and other existence is neither completely reliable nor sufficient.

It is my claim, however, that when these two criteria, Jesus of Nazareth and the flourishing of life, are brought together in a creative dialogical relationship, they are adequate to construct a Christian theology that may be accepted as provisionally true.[30] That is to say, such theology may be viewed as serviceable for guiding human existence and engendering human regard for all existence. Such theology may be accepted as a finite, imperfect, but authentic form of service to God. Such theology may thus be employed as a means of giving glory to the Creator.

---

[30]The never-ending need for theological reformulation is implicit in the provisional character of such theology. Explicitly, as our understandings of ourselves and our world change, as we gain new and different perspectives on the past as well as the present and the future, our theology must be reformulated in order to continue to provide an articulate and meaningful reflection upon our experience of God, life, and the world.