

# *Professor Potthoff and the Celebration of Life*

## *---A Review Article*

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This is a review of three books just published by Dr. Harvey H. Potthoff with some personal comments interspersed. His most important work to date suggested the title for this review. **God and the Celebration of Life** was published by Rand McNally and Co., Chicago, New York and San Francisco, 1969; 293 pages, \$6.95. The titles of the other two are presented later.

First, the personal word. Dr. Potthoff is Professor of Christian Theology at The Iliff School of Theology; he is active in the work of the church at all levels, including the national and world-wide; he does a great deal of lecturing which means much travel. One who reads his books quickly discovers that he keeps in touch with the theological world in all of its aspects. This, too, indicates time-consuming work. Mechanization and computerization may be reducing the work-load at some levels of our culture, but has little observable effect upon those who, like Dr. Potthoff, work with ideas. If it has, it acts as a catalyst by exposing them to more people, thus widening the scope of their interests. Production becomes the Highest Good and Work our Immediate God. (I write here from personal experience. Even in retirement, I find it difficult to avoid pursuit of the one and subservience to the other!)

In **God and the Celebration of Life**, Potthoff divides his task into three parts. The first is entitled "Asking the God-Question." The second focuses upon "Affirming the Reality of God"; and the third, "Living in the Light of God's Reality."

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Part I is devoted to the role or the Divine in man's quest for "wholeness." Potthoff adopts the view that the basic problem of man is that of achieving integrity, and avoiding the evils of fragmentation or partiality. Confronting the many facets of existence, pulled hither and yon by various forces, man finds it difficult to identify himself with any one of the many "selves" which together constitute what I have defined as personality, i.e., a system of systems of integrated habits characterized by some continuity of self-awareness. This is what Potthoff calls the "observer's view" of personality. At any rate, the problem of wholeness, integrity synthesis provides the background against which he discusses the problem or God. This is, of course, the problem of the function of religion.

Asserting that a contemporary view of religion must begin with the evolutionary perspective, he notes that its modes of functioning have been influenced by "growth in man's knowledges and skills." As man approaches what we now think of as maturity, the magical phase of religion becomes obsolete. Perhaps the following quotation will indicate the next phase. "On another level of human development, man recognizes the futility of imploring the gods for rain, good crops, good health, offspring, and so on. Man recognizes an orderliness in the course of events. He learns to distinguish more clearly what is within his control and what is beyond his control. He seeks the inner blessedness which comes from living in harmony with nature. He seeks serenity of spirit in the face of demoralizing aspects in the total scheme of things." This is identified with the Stoic way of life. "The stoic way of life has much of resignation in it. The stoic

settles for limited expectations. There is a measure of stoicism in all mature religion." (pp. 72f).

Potthoff believes there is a more positive attitude, that of joy in and appreciation for life, than was true of ancient stoicism. This is the basis for tying the Divine in with the celebration of life. Coupled with this is the view that one of the consequences of belief in the divine is that it tends to lift the level of human aspiration. And the highest aspiration is union with the Divine.

In the process of arriving at these conclusions as to the functional significance of belief in God, the author discusses the humanistic attempt to live without God; the Freudian view of God as a projection of our wishes, etc. He adopts the view that God is "hidden" in some real sense, and that our concepts must always be held tentatively, subject to change when new evidence or new perspectives make change necessary.

In Part II interest is focused upon the problem of the existence or "the reality of God." By way of approach Potthoff discusses four contemporary proposals. The first is identified in the writings of Nels Ferre, who thinks of God as a supernatural personal spirit. Ferre's views differ from traditional supernaturalism by the infusion of concepts associated with process philosophy. The second is found in the work of Paul Tillich who thought of God in terms of "Ground of Being" or "Being itself." The third is the Bultmannian position in which God is the transcendent Subject whom one meets in the Faith-event, namely, that in which God through Christ becomes available. The fourth is God as process and structure as formulated in Henry N. Wieman's conception of the Creative Event, or creative interaction. The author's own formulation of the divine is of more importance for this review. We turn to that now.

He thinks of God as Ground, Grace and Goal. He accepts the view that the word "God" is a religious term, referring to whatever may be "an ultimate, ob-

jective ground of faith and hope." and that this objective pole of the religious hope may be thought of as "the Wholeness-Reality." (p. 197) Here his conception of the task of the theologian becomes important. It is that of providing "theological interpretation of what is given in experience." I interpret this to mean approximately what Tillich had in mind when he spoke of "beliefful realism." The scientist or operationalist believes only what he can prove; the theologian all that cannot be disproved. In other words, one takes the data given in experience and interprets them as hopefully as possible. William James and Pragmatists in general defined ideas as instruments in man's quest for better life. The real test of any idea is its relevance in this quest. Potthoff's logic apparently belongs somewhere within this general context.

Reality is presented in organismic terms. It consists of a pluralism of parts (which are wholes in themselves) as constituent parts of the Whole. This Whole is more than the sum of its parts, as would be the case in a Functional metaphysics. This Wholeness Reality has both a religious and a cosmic reference. In other words, God as Wholeness-Reality must satisfy two interests, the religious and the cosmic or metaphysical. If it does not, then religious belief may be what Freud asserted it was.

Religiously, belief in Organicism provides a basis for belief in Jesus as revealer of the nature of God; in God as somehow personal with an interest in and concern for the individual person; for some form of Cosmic companionship, i.e., the view that men are not alone in a vast indifferent cosmos.

The third part of the book is entitled "Living in the Light of God's Reality." It contains helpful chapters on celebrating the "gift of our own uniqueness," "celebrating human dignity in the midst of adversity," "the celebration of life in devotion and prayer," and "a morality of celebration." The final chapter consists in a series of challenges to the churches.

Dr. Potthoff also wrote two of the eight

books in a new curriculum series entitled "Foundation Studies in Christian Faith." Two companion books of readings accompany them. The seventh book in the series is called **The Inner Life** (1969). It consists in two parts. The first considers the reality of the inner life, and the second the Resources and Disciplines of this phase of the human person. The significance of the inner life is summed up by Potthoff in this manner: 1. Wholeness consists in "an inner and outer life harmoniously related." 2. A wholesome life "is one of faith, hope, and love . . . The Christian movement of life is from anxiety toward basic trust, from despair to hope, from alienation to mature love." 3. "Inner freedom is a basic precondition of the capacity to live in growing faith, hope, and love." (p. 67)

The second part calls attention to some of the resources available through Christian faith for the realization of this type of life, and to the disciplines required for their efficient utilization. He suggests that this means relating oneself meaningfully to the "deeper rhythms" of existence. "Life processes involve birth, growth, fulfillment, deterioration, death, renewal, rebirth." (p. 87) The specific disciplines discussed are believing, relationships with nature in the larger sense, prayer and Christian fellowship. The book of readings for this part of the study consists in 127 selections, including one from "Charlie Brown." Edward L. Moore assisted in preparing this book.

The second of these Foundation Studies written by Dr. Potthoff is **The Christian in Today's World** (1969). It has two parts, first, "Foundations of the Christian Life," which consists in a summary of his basic theology related closely to the more formal and extended discussion in **God and the Celebration of Life**. The second part consists in a series of discussions of "The Christian way of celebrating life in the world." The first chapter of this section considers new styles in Christian discipleship. The eight-point proposals here should provide for an interesting discussion with some Church-school group of

adults. Other equally important subjects discussed are "a morality of human sensitivity," the Christian attitude toward work and leisure, the family and citizenship. Obviously, one does not have to accept the tentative proposals presented in this section. They are, however, matters of real concern and worth serious discussion.

As in the case of the previous book, a book of readings is provided for suggestions and for broadening the perspectives of those using it. I am sure both studies will be used widely throughout the church.

Several questions emerge as one reads these several books. One of them was raised by Potthoff in his review of J. Edward Carothers' recent work on **The Pusher and the Puller** (*The Iliff Review*; Winter 1969, p. 43). There he found it difficult to understand how Carothers moved from trends and tendencies in the cosmos to God as Pusher and Puller. One must raise the same question as to Potthoff's concept of God as "Wholeness-Reality." Wholeness may be collective, congregative, aggregative, agglutinative, etc. Or it may be organic, patterned after the biological phase of terrestrial existence. "Reality" is also a vague term. It may mean whatever "is" in some sense, or the totality of whatever "is." "Wholeness-Reality" would then possibly mean the sum-total of whatever is. The problem faced may be stated in this manner: How does one move from the cosmic "sum-total of whatever is" to the Christian conception of God as, presumably, revealed in Jesus Christ?

Potthoff seeks to make this transition by defining man's highest good as "wholeness," and then suggests that belief in God as Wholeness-Reality is of religious significance, and that this functional value of "Isness" justifies naming Wholeness-Reality God. This is a widely accepted practice, and may be the best we can do at the moment. But the question remains. Henry N. Wieman and I debated it through the columns of **The Journal of Religion** in 1943, and I formu-

lated my more recent suggestions in **The Iliff Review** (Fall 1960), under the title of "The 'Nature' of God."

By way of conclusion of this lengthy review, I suggest that **God and the Celebration of Life** is a significant book. It raises many of the right questions and offers sensible answers. It will prove helpful to many ministers and other stu-

dents because it tends to integrate modern thought into the main stream of Christian thought. The liberal use of biblical materials will make its appeal to many others. The two work-books and the books of readings were published by the Graded Press, Nashville, Tennessee, in 1969. They are paperbacks.

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