

HARVEY H. POTTHOFF: A THEOLOGY FOR TODAY

WILLIAM CALLOLEY TREMMEL

A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.

—Paul Tillich¹

It is not easy nor, perhaps, wise to expound upon another person's thought, especially if that person is your teacher and is apt to read what you have written; also perhaps not wise, if, as is the case with Harvey Potthoff, his writing is exceptionally well done, thus leaving you open to the charge that your smoke has not really done much to brighten his light. It is, however, not so much from trepidation as from good judgment that I suggest no substitute for reading Harvey Potthoff's articles and books "in the original." In doing so you will not only get the depth of his thought directly, but will enjoy lucid, artistic writing as well. Rather than act as a surrogate for Harvey Potthoff's words, I will attempt a more modest thing. I will attempt to view Potthoff's work as it appears to meet two criteria for Christian theology: (1) the *Kerygmatic* criterion, and (2) the *Zeitgeist* criterion. Kerygmatic in this regard is employed to mean the Christian message/preachment content in the theology, and *Zeitgeist* is employed to mean the degree to which the theology speaks directly to a given age (time-spirit)—in this case the modern world.

Personal Encounter

I am sure that it will not be news to many readers that Harvey Potthoff has a way of getting involved in a person's life. Because he did become so involved in my life, I am constrained to reveal an incident or two of that involvement.

First, as Christian churchman. Harvey Potthoff was, from 1936 to 1952, the pastor of Christ Methodist Church in Denver, Colorado. He was also teaching at Iliff during some of those same years. It was at Iliff in about 1942 that Dr. Potthoff invited me, a student, first to take some responsibility for a class of high school students at Christ Church, and later to assist him in conducting religious services. It was as his assistant that I preached my first sermon, which for a former Catholic boy was a memorable, even traumatic experience. It was also in Harvey Potthoff's counseling and Christ Church spon-

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¹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 3.

sorship that I became, almost to my surprise, a Deacon and then an Elder. As if that were not enough, it was in Christ Church that Harvey and my bride involved me in a life-time project.

Second, as teacher. I have no doubt that the teaching at Iliff today is as fine as it has ever been, *but* as a member of the graduating class of 1944, I want to remind some of us of the “good old days” when, as we will fervently witness, the school was also bright with such luminaries as Lindsey B. Longacre, Martin Rist, William Henry Bernhardt, and one other professor up in room 5. Elucidation: it so happened on one occasion that a notice was posted on the bulletin board concerning a classroom scheduling. The notice read: “God, in Room 5.” In the odd humor of seminarians, we dashed upstairs and there he was—Harvey H. Potthoff, waiting to inform us on things divine.

This account of a moment at seminary is my way of commenting that both then and since Harvey Potthoff has been not only a Christian churchman, an excellent teacher, and personal friend, but a first class theologian of a kind that the world has first class need of: a man with God-words for our times.

Theology: its function

Paul Tillich opened his own formidable theological effort, volume one of *Systematic Theology*, declaring that theology as a double responsibility—to declare the Christian message and to do so for every new generation. “Theology moves back and forth between two poles, the eternal truth of its foundation and the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received.”² Without holding necessarily to the full letter of the Tillich dictum, one can agree with Tillich that a Christian theologian in the 20th century should speak both to the times in which he lives (the *zeitgeist*) and to the truths of the Christian tradition (the *kerygma*) that he claims as his own. Potthoff professes to do both. We shall observe to what degree this double claim seems justified.

Theologian for Today: Zeitgeist Dimension

Potthoff’s theological contemporaneity becomes evident as one observes his philosophical affinities and his philosophical mentors. His general philosophical base appears to be in the metaphysical systems called, among other things, Contextualism and Organicism. His main philosophical mentors appear to be William H. Bernhardt and Alfred North Whitehead, and, perhaps, Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Throughout his works, Potthoff speaks in the categories of Contextualism and Organicism, which are philosophical/metaphysical systems that

²*Ibid.*

take as their basic metaphor or model an “event” or a “happening” or a “vital living system.” As contextualists and organicists see the world it is (at least in the human epoch) a vast system of happenings (events) occurring in a spread-out, forward flowing present. The “world events” as experienced are characterized by:

1. A configuration of parts—a context made up of individual things, or, stated differently, made up of parts in configuration.

2. Dynamics—individuals and contexts are in constant change. Change is real, and can be radical. Novelty (radical newness) is a real part of the world, and of the life and experiences of humans.

3. Wholeness—a context, an event, a happening, is never just the sum of its parts, but a transcendent novelty that has its own unique character. As with James’ lemonade or with the union of hydrogen and oxygen into water, something new (even unique) can occur in the flow of events—in the world processes.

4. Time, especially in Contextualism, is not linear but durational. Time is the duration of a happening. Clock time is a mere technique for convenience. Clock time may get you to appointments on time, or tell you that you missed one, but it does not identify real time. Time is serious business. In strict Contextualism (but not so in Organicism) the spread-out-ness of time (the recent past flowing into the passing present, moving into the arising future) is the total matrix of existence. Reality is now.

5. All events, scenes, happenings, have intuited quality or meaning. The quality is not a fixed entity but a flowing, changing, creative process. It emerges variously as strands in context (as the happenings) flow, converge, tighten, loosen, change, stabilize. In Contextualism change is fundamental and radical.

Meaning emerges as one engages life consciously. E.g., I intuit the quality-meaning of Lake Carroll as I look out of my window. The strands of the lake (the fact of the lake) and the strands of my consciousness fuse, and there it is before me in color, shape, motion—Lake Carroll. If I turn away, go away, forget the lake for a while, the quality recedes, disappears, because whatever Lake Carroll is when I look at it is not what it is when I am not looking at it, or what it becomes when I look at it again. The world is emerging endlessly new.

6. But what about the whole thing? Not just Lake Carroll, but the whole world of which Lake Carroll and I are but tiny strands? Is not the whole world also a happening that has fusion, change, direction, meaning? At this point in metaphysical speculation a contextualist usually retreats. He chooses not to characterize the ultimate event—the total reality.

7. When one begins to speculate on a wholeness concept he crosses over into different philosophical territory. He enters the speculative field usually called not Contextualism but Organicism—reality is like a living system—like an organism.

8. In Organicism reality is seen as an organic whole. The importance of the immediate emerging event in its durational time (so central in Contextualism) diminishes in favor of some wholeness concept; e.g., Hegel's Absolute which he saw not as thing-in-itself, but a world process characterized by activity and expressing itself in higher and higher levels of integration and perfection. More recently A.N. Whitehead and Père Teilhard de Chardin have made philosophical wholeness speculations.

Alfred North Whitehead

Many of Potthoff's theological claims are in line with, and/or supported by basic concepts in Whitehead's immanentistic/pantheistic process philosophy; such Whiteheadian concepts as:

1. Process. Whitehead presents the world as active, not static. Process, activity, change are basic to nature. Process is channelized activity; thus, there is an element of stability in flux.

2. Ecological Order. All things hang together. Everything is what it is because of its relatedness to everything else.

3. Prehension. Not only is everything related to its environment, but it appropriates part of that environment into itself. "Each Creative Act of the Universe is the Universe incarnating itself as one . . ."

4. Subjective Aim. Everything is moving toward concretions of increasing complexity; of increased harmony of diverse elements. Nature is a technological system, an aesthetic order, with an inherent drive to achieve higher levels of concretion.

5. Eternal Objects. There is a system of possibilities in reality: (a) things appear; (b) there is a consistency (patternfulness) in their appearance; (c) novelties emerge.

6. God.⁴ God is that which (a) contains possibilities, (b) creates things, (c) preserves values. In God, or more accurately, characterizing God there are, according to Whitehead, two natures—the Primordial and the Consequent.

God's Primordial Nature is comprised of the following unconscious or non-conscious dimensions:

- a. The conceptual entertainment (or containment) of Eternal Objects; i.e., the fullness of possibilities for reality.
- b. The ordering of activity—the potential for creative activity.

⁴In Charles Hartshorne's identification scheme, A.N. Whitehead's God concept includes Eternal, Temporal, Conscious, Knowing, World, aspects—ETCKW: "E"—God is eternal in some aspects; "T"—God is temporal in some aspects; "C"—God is conscious or self-aware; "K"—God knows the universe; "W"—God includes the world in some way. In Whitehead's theology God is "Eternal-Temporal Consciousness, Knowing and including the World." See Charles Hartshorne and William Reece, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953), pages 16 and 17.

- c. The Principle of Concretion. This is, apparently, Whitehead's concept of the prior condition of potentiality or instruction for the world's endless creative advance into newer, and newer, and newer, forms.

God's Consequent Nature is God as a living being in which and through which the actual world has its individual existence. This is God prehending the world, influencing its development, knowing it, conserving its values. For God to be consequent (to possess Consequent Nature) there must be a world—an objective and knowable world. In his Consequent Nature God is conscious—i.e., self-aware and world-knowing.

7. In Whitehead, creativity (the forever, forward motion of world process) is distinguishable from God. Apparently both God and the world are in the grip of the creative ground that drives them, or coaxes them or inspires them to new kinds and levels of reality.

In this regard Whitehead, in *Process and Reality*, states:

Neither God, nor the world, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty. Either of them, God and the World, is the instrument of novelty for the other.⁵

This *creative advance into novelty*, in which both God and the world are gripped, would seem to be not so much a ground of being (which suggests a static ground), but a process of becoming. (A position strongly affirmed by Potthoff.) This becoming must be forever changing/emerging for the infinite possibilities contained in God's primordial nature can never be actualized in one coherent system. Actualizing some world possibilities would cancel others out (e.g., a system in which all things were mechanistically arranged—in mechanistic connections—must cancel out a system in which all things are organismically arranged—arranged in biological interdependence.) The creative advance into novelty must be eternal in character.

The creative advance into novelty appears to be a process of allurement. God and the world are not driven to change from behind, but coaxed to change by a vision of fulfillment. That vision of fulfillment, according to Potthoff, seems to be a vision of "wholeness." The idea of divine allurement ("The Wholeness-Reality⁶ luring mankind to fullness of life") becomes an important dimension in Potthoff's theological thought. He proclaims increasingly the idea that God is to be characterized not only as that which causes/permits us to be, but that which lures us to fulfillment of life and spirit. God coaxes us to fulfillment, participates in our fulfillment; indeed, is himself enriched by it. In this kind of thinking one can again hear William James (as quoted by Potthoff in his article "The Churches Speak of Hope").⁷

⁵A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 529.

⁶For God as The Wholeness-Reality in Potthoff's thought see below; and see also, especially, Harvey H. Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1969), pp. 184-196, 237 ff., 249, 258. Hereafter referred to as GCL.

⁷*The Iliff Review*, Vol. XI, No. 3, Fall, 1954, p. 40. (Hereafter referred to as CSH.)

I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity. For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life may mean, if they mean anything short of this. If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulness, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheism and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted.⁸

William Henry Bernhardt.

Harvey Potthoff was obviously inspired and guided, as were many of us, by the work of William Bernhardt, Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Iliff School of Theology, 1929-64. The philosophical and theological agreements between the two men are of basic importance: metaphysically both are immanentalists; epistemologically both rely upon empirical methods of investigation and verification; both define religion functionally and identify the doctrine of God as emerging from the reinterpretive phase of functioning religion; both classify and conceptualize God in the same way; and Potthoff's theological speculations (his "individual-particular" dimension of God-talk) starts with Bernhardt's speculations in philosophy of religion and then develops beyond them.

First, Immanentalism. Both scholars are thorough-going immanentalists. Neither has in his system any place for supernaturalism. Like Bernhardt, Potthoff, in all his writings, consistently rejects supernaturalism in any form—be it absolute, as with Karl Barth, or partial, as with Borden Parker Bowne. In this regard, in an early article, Potthoff quotes Bernhardt:

. . . God must be sought within rather than without the cosmos as a whole . . . God is an activity, process, behavior, connectional system or structure of or wholly within the totality called nature, cosmos, or existential medium.⁹

⁸William James, *Essays on Faith and Morals* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), pp. 83-84.

⁹Quoted in Potthoff's article, "The Doctrine of God in W. H. Bernhardt's Philosophy of Religion," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XI, No. 1, 1954, p. 30; originally found in Bernhardt's *Philosophy of Religion*, 1940 edition (mimeographed), p. 110. Potthoff's article on Bernhardt's God concept will henceforth be referred to as DGB.

Second, empiricism. Bernhardt declared in a 1943 publication and again in a 1949 publication that precise definitions and philosophical talk concerning religion involve three presuppositions: first, religion must be defined in such a way that there will be an historical continuity of meaning. Second, the data used for arriving at conclusions and supporting conclusions must consist of what is generally regarded as religious behavior. Third, no favored consideration should be given to any type of religious experience.¹⁰ Potthoff, in all his writings, appears to function within these presuppositions. Bernhardt, in his *Cognitive Quest for God and Operational Theism*, states that one of the basic assumptions of Absolute Immanence is "the basic interest in 'stubborn and irreducible facts' characteristic of the traditional empiricists, but there is also the insistence upon the careful and honest clarification of hypotheses."¹¹ Potthoff, speaking of his own theological style, characterizes it as "a style of theologizing which is functional and empirical in its approach. . . . empirical methodologies, rather than authoritative or deductive methodologies, offer the greatest hope for creative theological work in our time."¹²

Third, Religious Reinterpretation and God. Bernhardt defined religion as "a complex form of individual and group behavior whereby persons are prepared intellectually and emotionally to meet the nonmanipulable aspects of existence positively by means of a reinterpretation of the total situation and with the use of various techniques."¹³ The doctrine of God emerges in the reinterpretive phase of functioning religion; that is, the God class and concepts are discerned when one tries to identify "the controlling power in reality as a whole, the power to which we submit ourselves, with which we ally ourselves, or with which we identify ourselves in our search for religious values."¹⁴ Apparently agreeing with Bernhardt's position, Potthoff states that the doctrine of God emerges on the level of reinterpretation; reinterpretation being the re-examination of man's life and world from a religious point of view while in the quest of religious values.

Fourth, God—Classification and Concept. Both Bernhardt and Potthoff identify the God class as being dynamic rather than agathonic. That is, instead of identifying God exclusively as that from which religious values come, one is to identify God as a functioning universal power, or some aspect of that power.

Identifying the God category as fundamentally dynamic (as a power category) does not exclude the agathonic/value aspect of the God concept. Bernhardt acknowledged this. For example, he identified the term God as be-

¹⁰William Bernhardt, *The Analysis of Religion* (Denver: 1943 edition, mimeographed), pp. 1-2; and *The Philosophy of Religion* (Denver: 1949 edition, mimeographed, p. 22).

¹¹William Bernhardt, *The Cognitive Quest for God and Operational Theism* (Denver: The Criterion Press, 1949), p. 53.

¹²Harvey Potthoff, "Life Styles in Theological Perspective," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Fall 1973, p. 14.

¹³William Bernhardt, *A Functional Philosophy of Religion* (Denver: Criterion Press, 1958), p. 157.

¹⁴Bernhardt, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 9, quoted in DGB, p. 22.

ing the religious name for that in the nature of things to which man seeks to relate himself harmoniously in his quest for religious values. But Bernhardt's concentration was primarily with God as a power concept—God as the determiner of existence and destiny. Potthoff, without rejecting this fundamental power category, goes considerably beyond it. Not unlike Whitehead, he is fascinated with God not only in the dimension of God's creative power, but also in the dimension of God's "Grace" and "Allurement."¹⁵ He declares:

The testimony of religious experience is not only that God gives life and provides the underlying condition in terms of which life is to be lived, but God also graciously gives himself, doing for man what man cannot do for himself. Thus, religiously adequate God-concepts not only provide the structural ideas for a comprehensive belief system, putting experience into an ordered pattern; they also identify the caring, sustaining, help-conferring, saving realities in man's total situation. This is what is implied when we say that in the life of religion reality is experienced *as gracious*. God is experienced not only as source and ground of being, but also as grace.¹⁶

Also, as indicated earlier, Potthoff discerns in the literature of religion and in the experiences of religious persons that the God concept is not only that to which we relate in our quest for religious values (as Bernhardt saw it), but that which lures us to seek and find those values. Potthoff states:

God as the Wholeness-Reality is forever acting as a lure upon man, seeking to draw him out of isolation and self-centeredness toward greater wholeness of being . . .

He who has been grasped by the vision of God as the Wholeness-Reality seeks God, not simply that he might be protected, consoled, or given a pleasant feeling, but that he might grow in likeness to God.¹⁷

Fifth, Theology—Individual and Particular. Bernhardt proposed that the problem of God occurred on three levels: the categorical, the conceptual and the individual-particular. He himself did outstanding work on the levels of category and concept; that is, on the philosophical levels. The third level (the individual-particular), which he identified as within the province of theology rather than philosophy of religion, Bernhardt acknowledged as important but did not himself concentrate attention there. It was at this point that Potthoff

¹⁵See especially GCL, pp. 202-211.

¹⁶GCL, p. 207.

¹⁷GCL, p. 211.

took over from his teacher and has made a primary contribution. This is the level or dimension in which one is concerned "with the relevance of God as defined to the specific religious needs of individual persons—the religious availability of God."¹⁸ This is the level of theology proper, and this is the level upon which Potthoff has moved forward to make a distinctive contribution, especially in relating the modern *zeitgeist* (the contemporaneous, modern, scientific, world view) to the doctrine of God. Writing in 1954 concerning Bernhardt's doctrine of God, Potthoff stated:

. . . if the philosophy of religion to which Dr. Bernhardt has given so many years of thought is to have increasing influence in the life of the churches, it is essential that further work be done not only on the conceptual but on the individual-particular level in terms of investigations showing the relevance of God as defined to specific human problems.¹⁹

Harvey Potthoff

In a 1945 article, Potthoff wrote: "It is hardly enough to say that God is in the world; there is the further responsibility of indicating what in the world God is."²⁰ In a 1954 article, he observed that Bernhardt had not pursued at length this problem of "what in the world God is." And then went on to say on his own:

God is the dynamic phase, behavior or structure within the Existential Medium to which men turn and upon which they rely in their quest for religious values. Any reality, then, which may qualify to be designated as God must be that in the universe which makes possible a hopeful adjustment to death and other demoralizing nonmanipulables.²¹

In an article entitled "The Reality of God," written in 1967, Potthoff reaffirmed that the God-word refers to that reality toward which a person directs his attention, and around which he attempts to orient his living, and to which he responds in trust and devotion,²² and then went further to say that "serious God-talk must proceed in a di-polar fashion as we speak from both objective and subjective poles. . . . The theologian in our time must seek to relate the

¹⁸DGB, p. 35.

¹⁹DGB, p. 37.

²⁰Harvey Potthoff, "Theological Preaching in the Liberal Pulpit," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. II, No. 2, Spring, 1945, p. 211. Henceforth referred to as TLP.

²¹DGB, pp. 33-34.

²²Harvey Potthoff, "The Reality of God," *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, Spring, 1967, p. 10. Referred to henceforth as ROG.

God discerned in the vast reaches of the universe with the God discerned in the promptings of the inner spirit of man.”²³ The inner life is a real and important dimension in the search for God. In the quest for God an appropriate rhythm must be maintained “between the God discerned in vast cosmic movements and the sweep of centuries on the one hand—and the God discerned in our immediate presence, in the emerging creativeness and significance of the situation at hand. God is extensively and intensively present in our world in the matrix of our being—far and near.”²⁴ God is far out and nearby—in the heavens declaring, and in the stillness of the human soul. In “The Reality of God” Potthoff proclaims, “It is my belief that there is a basis for human hope and a clue to man’s most appropriate direction of expectation in the way things are—in the character of the whole of which we are part . . .”²⁵

This God in the wholeness of reality, Potthoff believes, cannot be discerned with finality, at least in the state of our contemporary knowledge and experience. But he also believes that “we can speak with some assurance of patterned process”—a process in terms of which man can reinterpret and reassess his life, and the whole of his world, with justifiable “hope in the affirmation of the human venture.” He states his conviction in this matter as follows:

It is my own judgment that insofar as man comes to be related to what is fundamental and enduring in the nature of things (here referred to as patterned process) in such ways that there emerge religious meanings and values (the life of faith), the language of trust and devotion—including the affirmation of the reality of God—is appropriate.²⁶

Potthoff argues that the model “patterned” is appropriate in speaking of the world as known and experienced because we encounter this world not in a haphazard fashion, but in an orderly, patternful way. It comes to us not as disordered scatter, but as organized direction. Our world presents us with “the element of directionality in the eventfulness of the universe.”²⁷ Potthoff believes that his patterned process is a “Real-Other which sustains a relation of immanence to all things, entering into the determination of all things even though other-than or more-than or transcendent to particular things.”²⁸

As we noted earlier, Potthoff believes that one knows the world and the world’s God not only by objective scientific/philosophical investigation, but

²⁴Harvey Potthoff, “God and the Newer Views of the Universe,” *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, Fall, 1959, p. 49.

²⁵ROG, p. 12.

²⁶ROG, p. 11.

²⁷ROG, p. 12.

²⁸ROG, p. 13.

²⁹ROG, p. 14.

also by direct, personal experience. To say this is to affirm the importance of the religious response. God is to be seen not only in the patterned processes of the whole universe, but also in the answering and fulfilling of religious questions and needs. Persons respond to, and are answered by, the vision of what they believe to be the Real-Other. They respond in trust and devotion. Their responses are marked by "the coming of hope in the midst of what might be demoralizing; by an inner orientation in the light of the vision of the divine; by various techniques of acting out the transforming vision."²⁹

In religious response, a person comes to understand himself as he relates to God; and he does not merely observe the divine order, he participates in it. "The reality of God breaks in upon him *as light* (bringing a new perception of existence); *as possibility* (for a new kind of existence); *as summons* (into the world)."³⁰ When persons declare that God is a saving God, they are speaking from experience. It may not be the experience of abstract thinking, nor the experience of microscopes and telescopes, but it is experience. "The Life of faith emerges at the meeting point of man's search for God, God's coming to man, man's response in trust and devotion. It is at the point of emerging faith that the language of personal confession is appropriately employed . . ."³¹

According to Potthoff, the subjective pole of the God-experience includes: the experience of deliverance, the experience of integrity and presence, the experience of trust, the experience of forgiveness, the experience of healing, the experience of freedom, the experience of love that accepts and brings wholeness, the experience of claim and summons to a life of moral commitment, the experiences that lead some persons to affirm the reality of God as the Real Other and to witness to the meaning and experience of God's continuing revelation.³²

In his book, *God and the Celebration of Life*, Potthoff gives a more precise characterization to his God concept, calling it the Wholeness-Reality. First, he states that the God-idea "is the idea of the Ultimate-Real-Other experience as faith and hope conferring." God is, as Whitehead declared in his Ingersoll lecture on immortality, "the tangible fact at the base of finite existence." But what the "fact" finally is, what God finally is, remains a mystery. "Intellectual integrity requires that we recognize the inevitability of living with vast mystery and ignorance. . . . no person is in a position to speak with finality about the reality of God."³³

But however mysterious and unknown God may be, human experience, both objective and subjective, argues for "a cosmic environment which responds to [a person's] efforts, which in some sense accepts him and grants him permission to go on from where he is. . . . to believe that there is some-

²⁹ROG, pp. 14-15.

³⁰ROG, p. 15.

³¹ROG, p. 15.

³²ROG, pp. 15-16.

³³Harvey Potthoff, GCL, pp. 174-178.

thing cumulative in the cosmic process, and that along with the loss inherent in the temporal processes something of value is nevertheless conserved.”³⁴

In an important passage in *God and the Celebration of Life* (in a section on “God as the Wholeness-Reality”), Potthoff summarizes his position on God as the Wholeness-Reality. First, he points out that in all our living and dying we keep encountering not a single event or entity, but a complex of diversity and wholeness. We are endlessly involved in a highly complex and dynamic scheme of things that includes relationships and processes and structures and directions. Many persons perceive (without any way of proving the truth or falsity of the belief) that there is a single power that in some measure causes and directs the moving scheme of things. If the person is a religious person, he may think this flow of events and happenings is to be finally understood in relation to some Divine-Real-Other—i.e., God. Potthoff states that if “one uses the word ‘God’ [in this reference] he ought to use it in the understanding that the ultimate reality man is always coming up to combines unity and diversity, wholeness and particularity, immanence and transcendence”³⁵. . . . The word ‘wholeness’ functions in pointing to the totality and the part-whole-structure of reality.”³⁶

To begin to see reality in wholeness terms, Potthoff suggests, is to begin to see reality in a different way. One begins to view reality (not in the limited event model of Contextualism, but in the holistic organism of Organismic metaphysics) in its depth and height and breadth; as an affair of being and becoming; as something both vastly “out there” and intensely “in here”; as something of exorbitant potentiality and qualitative richness; “in its never-ending interplay of persons, events, and situations; in its creation, disintegration, and re-creation; in its flux and in its long-range dependabilities; in its impartiality and integrity; in its endings and new beginnings; in its mysterious uniting of fate and freedom, tragedy and triumph, death and life, creation and redemption.”³⁷ Looking at the universe in such fashion, one may see the meaningfulness of identifying the God we encounter in our religious experiences as being “the Wholeness-Reality, experienced in trust, devotion and hope. . . . whatever more God may be, God is [at least] the Wholeness-Reality fundamental to the universe in its dynamic, relational, evolutionary fullness

³⁴GCL, p. 182.

³⁵The transcendence that Potthoff opposes to immanence in this case is not to be confused with the transcendence of supernaturalism (e.g., the Absolute Transcendence of Karl Barth), but transcendence in the way a whole is always more than the sum of its parts; in the way that genuine novelty is never reducible to the elements of its cause—e.g., lemonade is not simply lemon juice, sugar and water: it is a genuinely different tart-sweet, tasty drink. Nor is water just a combination of oxygen and hydrogen. It is wet. Potthoff states: “To speak of God as the Wholeness-Reality is to affirm the transcendent dimension of reality without falling into other-worldly supernaturalism. The ideas of immanence and transcendence are held in tension and correlation.” GCL, p. 193.

³⁶GCL, pp. 190-191.

³⁷GCL, pp. 191-192.

and open-endedness, and fundamentally implicated in man's arrival, survival, becoming, dying, and hoping."³⁸

There can be no doubt, I think, that Harvey Potthoff speaks God-talk relevant to this modern world. He also speaks as a Christian.

Theologian For Today: Kerygmatic Dimension

A modern Christian theology needs to be not only modern, but also Christian, and this is not exactly an easy task. We simply do not live in the same world as did earlier Christians, all the way back to the first century. The differences between modern and ancient knowledge and life styles are enormous. It is as different as sacred myth is from objective science. The question becomes, "How can we have theology based in modern philosophy and science that also incorporates the Christian mythology?"

Various attempts are made to accomplish this. One attempt is what we might call the "schizoid-method." It is, I suspect, the most widespread method in use today. Here one somehow, and apparently without too much effort, is both ancient Christian and pragmatic modern at precisely the same time. It is accomplished by a theological sleight of hand in which the right hand is not informed of the left hand's doings. More technically, and more sophisticatedly, it amounts to an epistemological dualism; as, for example, one finds in Barthian forms of Absolute Transcendence.

Another attempt to preserve both the ancient and the modern is to be found in the theological method of Nels Ferre'. Here there is an attempt to reaffirm ancient supernaturalism and the classical Christian stance by putting it in a modern dress. The particular modern dress that Ferre' admires and attempts to utilize is the process metaphysics of A. N. Whitehead.

Paul Tillich illustrates a different method of "modernizing" the ancient faith. His is the "method of correlations"—a method of questions and answers. The questions arise from the human condition (Existentialism) and are answered by the ancient tradition (biblical Christianity). Tillich sees the Christian tradition (the biblical tradition) as offering adequate answers for the human condition of estrangement. He avoids (or short circuits) the question of naturalism vs. supernaturalism by arguing, first, that there is no other world; and by arguing, second, that God is not a "something" in existence (in the world), but the very source of existence (of the world)—the ground of being.

Rudolph Bultmann is still another illustration of an attempt to modernize the ancient faith. Bultmann denies supernaturalism and other mythical language found in the biblical tradition. One is to demythologize the biblical writings (set aside the biblical story) but discern and preserve and treasure and utilize the "true kerygma" presented in the ancient mythological language. And that kerygma, *a' la* Bultmann, is Jesus Christ—crucified and resurrected.

³⁸GCL, p. 192.

Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, was "God's eschatological act of salvation."

We might characterize the above methods of theology as: schizoid (fundamentalist/conservative); epistemological transcendence (Barth); supernatural reaffirming (Ferre'); human condition-Christian symbol correlation (Tillich); kerygmatic reductionism (Bultmann). But these are not the only styles being employed in modern Christian theology. Harvey Potthoff seems to be employing what might be called "the method of Christian insight." In reading his articles and books, one is aware that Potthoff takes the Christian tradition (the Christian myth) and the books of that tradition (the Bible) seriously. Just as he holds that modern theology must concern itself with objective, scientific facts regarding man and his universe, he also, as we observed, affirms the place of the inner life (individual-particular experience) as a legitimate source of informative insight concerning God and religion; and the Christian tradition is a grand treasury of religious insight.

In an "insight methodology," the myth (the faith story and its meanings) and the books that contain the myth in its early form are to be taken seriously, but not literally (nor even, somehow, as the one and only kerygmatic truth). The scriptures are to be taken seriously as books of religious insight, not books of historical and cosmic facts. In the Bible we have an old theology book, not a new science and/or philosophy book. One is reminded of what Harry Emerson Fosdick once said on the subject: The Bible tells us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.

As we examine Potthoff's writings we can see that he seems to use Christian myth, scripture, tradition not as authorities for religious belief and action, but as accounts of the wisdom of the heritage. He uses this wisdom most often as useful insight. It is wisdom to be taken seriously as dramatic, aesthetic, insightful technique in preaching and ministry, but not as the fixed revelation/kerygma for modern religious (Christian)man. He seems to say that the Christian myth did act as a mediation agent between God and man, and that it can still do so, but it was not, and is not, the final philosophy of truth and salvation. For example, on several occasions, Potthoff affirms that Jesus Christ has been a major mediator between God and man. Jesus Christ was God in the world in a special event. But Jesus Christ is not necessarily *the* symbol, *the* exclusive agent, of God in the life of man. Christ is not salvation so much as a symbol, a paradigm, a vision, an allurements, in man's search for meaning and fulfillment. It is true that God is to be seen in the creative event that found its explosive emergence in the life, death, and continuation of life called Jesus Christ; but, then, God is seen in all creative events—all the way from the explosive birth of a universe to the "explosive" birth of springtime.

In his article, "Life Styles in Theological Perspective," Potthoff declares something of his own style:

Obviously Christianity encompasses vast differences of thought and style. There is no *one* Christian theology and there is no one Christian life style. What I have to say reflects the approach of one Christian who is committed to a style of theologizing which seeks to draw on the resources of scripture, tradition, experience and reason while denying that any one alone is the final arbiter in matters of truth. It is a style of theologizing which assumes that it is better to know than not to know; that truth is wholistic; that learning comes from many sources; that no one person or group has a monopoly on truth or goodwill. It is a style of theologizing which endeavors to bring together insights from Christianity with learnings from other faiths and philosophies, with knowledge coming from modern science and varied forms of contemporary experience.³⁹

Again and again in his writing Potthoff highlights the Christian tradition in its kerygmatic dimension. Again and again he identifies the “saving truths and insights” of the Christian tradition. The following are only a few examples of his practice:

1. On Christians and Christian Faith: “Christian faith makes tremendous claims. It holds that there is a ground of enduring courage; that life in its depths is meaningful; that man was born for wholeness so that, even in the midst of separation, brokenness, and fragmentation, there is a Divine Power, not ourselves, that makes for healing and reconciliation and true personhood.”⁴⁰

“The Christian bears witness to (1) the living God; (2) a new life; (3) the reality of creative and redemptive fellowship.”⁴¹

2. On the Trinity: “. . . in the doctrine of the Son and Holy Spirit we have an unstated recognition of the principle that God becomes relevant to human experience and human needs only as he becomes immanent in the world.”⁴²

“The doctrine of the Trinity affirms both the reality of God and the hiddenness of God, for just as a mask (persona) defines a role, it also serves to conceal.”⁴³

3. On Jesus Christ: “Christian faith . . . emerges in the response of trust and devotion to the vision, presence and summons of God mediated by nature, by varied events and experiences, and supremely by dependable, accepting, self-giving love. . . . Such love, according to Christian witness, is declared in the Jesus of history . . . In this perspective the Christ-event occurs where new

³⁹Harvey Potthoff, “Life Styles in Theological Perspective,” *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XXX, no. 3, Fall, 1973, p. 14.

⁴⁰Harvey Potthoff, *A Theology for Christian Witnessing* (Nashville: Tidings, 1964), p. 13. Hereafter referred to as TFCW.

⁴¹TFCW, p. 20.

⁴²TLP, p. 211.

⁴³GLC, p. 101.

life emerges out of old existence, freedom to trust and hope and care is born through experience of the living God mediated in relationship of integrity and mature love.”⁴⁴

“Judaism and Christianity affirm the revelation of God as creative power and purposiveness in nature and history. Christianity goes on to affirm God’s supreme act of revelation and redemption in Jesus Christ, whereby man is given to know that the God of creative power is also the God of redeeming love.”⁴⁵

4. On Forgiveness: “The traditional views of forgiveness have stressed the divine initiative in the forgiving process. It is God from whom man is estranged; it is God who initiates restoration . . . This is a valid insight whether our theology be one of transcendence or immanence. Man cannot work out his salvation in isolation . . . The desire for forgiveness and the will to be forgiven is not enough; there must be a forgiving God.”⁴⁶

5. On Salvation: “To speak of salvation through God in Jesus Christ is to speak of salvation through the divine self-giving love incarnate in, mediated by, and witnessed to in Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴⁷

6. On Redemption: “But whence comes this deepest of all transformations which Christian faith called redemption? The Christian answer is clear—through divine law, by which we are disciplined, and through the divine self-giving love that comes to us—the love that takes unto itself the burden of the world, the love that accepts and heals and reunites, the love that makes true freedom possible and inspires genuine creativity.

“This is the meaning of law and grace. This is the meaning of the Christian drama of redemption.”⁴⁸

7. On the Bible: “In New Testament literature we find at least two patterns of thought in reference to man’s hope in God. One is the apocalyptic pattern stressing the supernatural character of God, the essential helplessness of man, the evil character of the present age, and man’s absolute dependence upon the intervention of God for the establishment of a new and perfect age. The second pattern of hope is that of the Kingdom of God suggesting the immanence of God, the significance of human effort in removing and overcoming evil, the possibility of man working in cooperation with God in the gradual improvement of the human situation, and the possibility of a growing reign of God in the minds and lives of men within the present world-order.”⁴⁹

“Dr. Lindsay Longacre used to say that the Bible did not first produce religion; religion produced the Bible. This great literature is in a sense a by-

⁴⁴ROG, p. 17.

⁴⁵GCL, p. 264.

⁴⁶Harvey Potthoff, “Some Comments on the Doctrine of Forgiveness,” *The Iliff Review*, Vol. I, No. 1, Winter, 1944, p. 25.

⁴⁷TFCW, p. 35.

⁴⁸TFCW, p. 35.

⁴⁹Harvey Potthoff, “The Churches Speak of Hope,” *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XI, Fall, 1954, p. 45.

product—an overflow—of deep and moving religious convictions and experiences.”⁵⁰

8. On the Church: “If a sacrament is a channel of God’s saving grace, then the saving fellowship is a sacramental Church in this sense—it is entrusted with the sacrament of concern and Christian love—which are, indeed, of God.”⁵¹

“Within the Christian fellowship there is the uncoerced temptation to be more Christian.”⁵²

An Old Question / A New Order

Since student days at Iliff, I have had a recurrent curiosity: At what point in “creative advance” does a tradition stop being a tradition and become a new order? When does a tradition become just an affair of honorable genetics and ancestry?

I grew up in a Christian tradition that included all of the classical items: God, a person, other than the world—supernatural—knowing and loving human persons enough to give his son as a sacrifice for mankind’s redemption; man, a fallen creature, needing redemption, a condition that he could not accomplish on his own; Jesus Christ, the incarnate God-Man, motivated by divine love, condescending to death on a cross to effect the redemption and salvation of mankind, resurrected in the flesh, overcoming death, overcoming death not only for himself but for me that I might live again in direct communion with God; and a book and tradition that constitute basic authorities for Christian belief and life, that preserve the true revelation of God and the fundamental statement on the meaning and destiny of man and his earthly world. I have always tended to suspect, as an old Roman-Protestant Christian, that such features are not finally deniable if the system is to hold.

The problem, modern theologians inform us, is that people (well, many people) no longer find this mythology and tradition acceptable. It must be “epistemologically transcendentalized” or “symbolically correlated” or “de-mythologized” or “insighted”—used primarily for dramatic effect to present general religious insights in traditional and dramatic style. Indeed, the connection of ancient myth and tradition with modern theology is more an historical accident than an essential kerygmatic connection. The world is not like ancients conceived it to be, and wrote about it, and lived it. If the ancient faith is to survive, we (theologians anyway) must reinterpret it in modern ways.

There is nothing especially new about reinterpreting an ancient faith in updating language. Paul did it, the Gnostic Marcion did it, Origen did it,

⁵⁰Harvey Potthoff, “The Free Spirit and the Church’s Theological Task,” *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, 1955, p. 6.

⁵¹Harvey Potthoff, “The Church as a Saving Fellowship,” *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, Winter, 1960, pp. 40-41.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 44.

Augustine did it, Thomas did it, Luther did it, Calvin did it. They all tried to restate (and most of them successfully) the original message in the language styles of their hearers. But none of them tried to do it in a modern world—a world of modern science and technology, modern philosophies, modern communication systems and exploding computerized knowledge. They all preserved intact the other world, fallen man, loving personal God, redeeming Christ, life-after-death syndrome—which is difficult to do today in responsible, 20th century theology, if not impossible.

The question is: How much bending can a tradition take before it “breaks” and becomes a new order? If we embrace (as I most heartily do), a new immanentistic, contextualistic, organismic philosophy of religion, with God as creative process, or creative advance, or emergent evolution, or Wholeness-Reality; and man as complicated, mysterious, marvelous, participant in the divine advance; and salvation as here-and-now responsible maturity and wholeness, glorified with occasional aloneness, sadness, loneliness, pleasure, accomplishment, joy—none of which centers in the Christian myth of supernatural God, fallen man, redeeming Christ, life after death—are we not, in fact, in a new order of belief and life; in a new religion?

What I am saying here should not be construed as a criticism of the work of such men as Harvey Potthoff and his great teacher (and my great teacher) William Bernhardt. Especially it is not intended as a criticism of Harvey Potthoff’s long and continuing dedication to the Christian church and Christian theology. If anything my comments here indicate the size of the job he has undertaken if the new order of Christian thinking is to come about. But whether or not, finally, the Christians really listen to him seriously does not detract from the value of this preachment. Harvey Potthoff is speaking religion realistically to the 20th century and that is more than can be generally said of most contemporary preaching and/or theologizing.

Whether the “church” listens or not, Harvey Potthoff writes and speaks a liberating theology for at least some of those who do hear him—some of us who can no longer center our lives in the ancient myth. As a final word of personal privilege, I say that it is possible, in the new Potthoff-type theology, to wear the Christian *persona* when the spirit moves one to do so, or discard it without conscience when so inclined. One can experience God in the middle of the Christian scene without the slightest sense that either “God and I” are Christians, or not Christians. Or one can have nothing to do with the scene at all and yet know God in sunsets and dandelions, in music and sailboats, in small black dog and laughing child, in flower and bird flight, in Christmas and Good Friday, in tears and joy, in birth and death—in *being intensely alive*. One can respect the tradition as one, perhaps, respects his Irish heritage for the lilt it gave to his spoken words, but who, in fact, no longer needs the heritage for the lilt, or even needs the lilt. One can at times feel joyously Christian without being “Christian” at all.

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