POTTHOFF'S "BLESSED RAGE FOR ORDER"—THE QUEST FOR A RELEVANT THEISM

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> The final truth of religion is in fact its objective ground in theism.
> —David Tracy

> . . . there is a basis for human hope *in the way things are—in the character of the whole of which we are a part.*
> —Harvey H. Potthoff

I.

In his *Essay on Theological Method,* Gordon Kaufman insists that all theology depends upon clarifying what the word "God" means. He argues that "God" is "a construct of the imagination which helps tie together, unify and interpret the totality of experience." Kaufman suggests that there are three movements in the theological "order of construction," namely, "the imaginative move beyond the items and objects of experience itself to construct a notion of the context in which all experience falls, a concept of the world." The second movement is "the constructive leap which limits and relativises this concept of the world through generation of the concept of God." Finally, the imagination "returns again to experience and the world, grasping them theologically."[1]

While Potthoff would differ with Kaufman on whether "the imagination" gets through to realities in a descriptive, or at least designative, way and insist that theology is more than "conceptual poetry" (Anders Nygren), I think he might agree with the order of theological construction Kaufman sets forth. At least Kaufman's proposal suggests three considerations in discussing Potthoff's theological method: (1) An analysis of religious experience; (2) The objective ground of theistic language; (3) The contemporary relevance of Christian theology.

II.

Many of us students at Iliff in the 1950s were caught, in a way, between the ascendency of neo-orthodoxy on the one hand, and the empirical tradition of the "Chicago school" on the other. While Iliff Hall reverberated with names like Schleiermacher and Ritschl, Josiah Royce and William James and

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[1]Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Scholars Press, 1975), p. 41.

William Ernest Hocking, with Whitehead and Dan Williams, Bernard Meland and Henry Nelson Wieman, my generation of seminarians knew that neo-orthodoxy dominated theological education, owing to the fact that Barth and Brunner and Bultmann and the Niebuhrs and Tillich and their imposing network of colleagues and disciples were writing and publishing and lecturing and appearing everywhere at once! I remember my own skepticism one day in class when Professor Potthoff declared that "process theology" was the wave of the future. To consider the rather meager contingent of empirical theologians in that time as the avant garde of a major new direction in contemporary theology was simply audacious, even for the most enthusiastic young Iliffians.

Some of us were, nevertheless, willing to allow that currents were changing, that something important was happening in theology at Iliff, evident in the exciting and challenging theological instruction in Potthoff's classes where he carefully explained the important alternatives in contemporary theology, sketching out and developing his own methodologies and doctrines, exhibiting his deep and lasting commitments to Christian teaching and to the church as the principal arena of responsible life and witness in an increasingly perplexing and threatening world—a world that presented us at the same time with possibilities for celebration, creativity, and hope.

It is not possible here to do justice to Harvey Potthoff's theology, nor to his treatment of basic Christian doctrines. What I intend is a discussion of several important aspects of his theological method in light of David Tracy's notion of "revisionist" theology developed in his *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology.* These two theologians have much in common regarding the problems faced by contemporary theology and in their strategies for dealing with the "cultured despisers" of religion in our time.

Tracy's review of "the cognitive, ethical, and existential crises" confronting theology in an essentially post-Christian era parallels Potthoff's analysis of the growing skepticism about traditional ways of dealing with the existence of God. Both Tracy and Potthoff are keenly aware of that mood so aptly expressed in Wallace Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West"—a mood reflecting the quest for new values and images in which poetry itself is seen as:

> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Indeed, both theologians are aware too of Stevens' effort to reach "beyond belief" in symbolic and poetic gestures, and both are certain, though in somewhat different ways, that theology is about to speak intelligibly about the reality of God.

We have all rehearsed on other occasions the many sources of theological confusion in our time—the collapse of certainty, the dissolution of tradition,

the demise of metaphysics, and the modern migration into the sanctuaries of narcissism—in terms of which any theology today must do its work.[2] Recognizing these and other characteristics of modernism, Tracy outlines five models in contemporary theology, providing helpful summaries of orthodoxy, liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, radical theology, and his own revisionist position which he offers as the best possible combination of the insights of each in a new theological stance.[3] The revisionist theologian, says Tracy, "is committed to what seems clearly to be the central task of contemporary Christian theology: the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity."[4]

As if providing illustration of revisionism, though written much earlier, Potthoff proposes a way of thinking about God that departs from both traditional supernaturalism, on the one hand, and a kind of ethical liberalism on the other. He speaks of an empirical theology in a "neo-naturalistic" key, which "endeavors to be faithful to the subjective dimension of the life of faith, while also being faithful to the character of the Real-Other to which we are subject in our living and in our dying."[5] Without claiming that Potthoff would endorse Tracy's theological assumptions, his procedures and conclusions in every respect, I think it fair to suggest that there is some agreement between them regarding the theologian's responsibility to "basic Christian texts," and "common human experience" as providing fundamental data for theological reflection. While Potthoff has been criticized at times for not being sufficiently orthodox, there has never been any question that he is utterly serious about the relevance of Christian values and ideas for the contemporary world. "There are those," he writes, who believe we have moved into a post-Christian era. Some regret this fact and others welcome it. Before passing judgment on that issue, it is well for us to recall the nature of the Christian vision and the Christian languages. Only then will we be in a position to raise the question of contemporary relevance."[6] His effort has always been to set fourth a Christian vision of life that "makes sense" to men and women whose basic understandings of their own lives are shaped by modern assumptions rather than by ancient biblical and theological principles.

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[2]See Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Bobs-Merrill, 1969), chapter 2, "The Cultural Background of the Current Theological Situation," for a thorough discussion of the characteristics of modern secularism and its impact on theology.

[3]David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Seabury Press, 1975). See especially chapter 2, pp. 22-43. Cf. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind,* chapters 3 and 4. Gilkey traces the development of modern theology and its several key movements.

[4]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 32.

[5]Harvey H. Potthoff, "The Reality of God," *The Iliff Review,* XXIV, 2 (Spring 1967), p. 10.

[6]Harvey H. Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life* (Rand McNally, 1969), p. 122.

While he is indeed a Christian theologian, his basic interest is with the question of God as that question is illuminated by Christian and non-christian sources, by religious and secular fields of investigation. In class he always reminded us of the difference between *theocentric* and *christocentric* approaches to the doctrine of God, indicating a clear preference for theocentricism rather than christocentrism. He argued that Jesus Himself was theocentric, and I suspect that Potthoff's vision of God is seen more through the teachings of Jesus than through christological formulae concerning God's nature and properties. Nevertheless, he is assuredly trinitarian: "The continuing Christian vision is the vision of God whose creative power is declared in nature, whose redeeming love is made known in Christ, whose comforting, instructing, guiding presence is manifest through his indwelling spirit." But he is more comfortable with "the languages of Christian faith most widely heard, grasped, and responded to . . . in which the presence and work of God is declared in connection with a person, a drama, and a community of faith," than he is with the classical doctrines of the church.[7]

III.

Since Luther, Descartes, and Kant, the modern world has been preoccupied with what Whitehead called "the inward journey of the soul" as distinct from the "cosmic, universal drama" of former ages. Soren Kierkegaard's radical subjectivism, his "leap of faith," is Luther's *sola fidei* in the extreme, placing the burden of "proof" for the existence of God upon the individual "will to believe"—or, more appropriately, reducing the question of God's existence to a matter of individual belief. Thus, Kierkegaard speaks of "the flight of the alone to the Alone," suggesting that the "knight of faith" embarks on a solitary journey in his quest for the "Wholly Other."

While there is much to be said for this "existentialist" rendering of radical subjectivity, it presents a one-sided interpretation of the relationship between God and human persons, focusing exclusively upon the self's experience of isolation, despair, and faith. Kant's analysis of "practical reason"—his emphasis upon the feeling of moral imperative—combined with Kierkegaard's own Lutheran-Descartian reduction, represents one important element in modern theological construction. The foundations of orthodoxy summarized in Catholic dogma and sacramentalism, and in Protestant biblicism, insisting upon a body of teaching, a communal system of rites, and an inerrant body of truth, provide a counterthrust to modern religious subjectivism.

In an important sense, modern empirical theologies qualify this modernist-orthodox polarity in their efforts to link the subjective apprehension of reality with a coherent metaphysical scheme, insisting that the mind

[7]Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life,* pp. 127-28.

does grasp realities corresponding to perceptions or ideas in the mind itself. Henry Nelson Wieman, for example, identifies God with "creative interchange" in human relationships in which value is added to human experience through intellectual and ethical and aesthetic appreciation and through social growth and maturity. For Wieman, God is the ground of that creative possibility providing for the emergence and accretion of value in human life and society. Professor Potthoff's concept of God is more extensive than this, as we shall see, but he is making a similar claim, namely, that faith in God, or belief in God, is grounded in discernible patterns of reality that claim, judge, sustain, and move us beyond ourselves. Thus, empirical theologians are eager to relate the experience of God to the objective reality of God, insisting on the importance of relating definitions to data, and, correspondingly, the importance of this effort itself as a legitimate theological activity. This effort to locate and name realities that correspond to long-standing Christian notions about God's nature is a basic element in Potthoff's theological procedure.

Before we explore this issue further, however, it is first of all necessary to elaborate the modern theological interest in the phenomenology of religious experience. Following Tillich, David Tracy is interested in the "religious dimension" of all forms of human experience, not simply those with ostensibly religious meanings. Since Kant's effort to link God's existence with "the feeling of oughtness," theologians have tried to identify and describe that "feeling of absolute dependence" (Schleiermacher), that "experience of the Holy" (Rudolph Otto), that "Ultimate Concern" (Tillich) which constitutes the uniquely human side of religion. Tracy finds these concepts helpful, but too expansive. Instead, he wants a more definitive term for recognizing "certain signal characteristics peculiar to any language or experience with a properly religious dimension."[8] Thus, Tracy is interested in the "limit-questions" and "limit-situations" that disclose the "religious horizon" of our everyday experience of the world in all of its common scientific, aesthetic, and moral dimensions. Through these experiences, we become aware of, and begin to reflect upon, certain "limits-to" our existence (e.g., finitude, contingency, transcience, etc.) which, in turn, point to the "limits-of" existence, to a limiting ground that is both supportive and destructive of our lives, but which also undergirds and gives rise to "our fundamental trust in the worthwhileness of existence, our basic belief in order and value."[9] Tracy explains this further:

> . . . limit-situations refer to two basic kinds of existential situation: either those 'boundary' situations of guilt, anxiety, sickness, and the recognition of death as one's own destiny, or those situations called 'ecstatic experiences'—intense joy, love, reassurance, creation. All genuine limit-situations refer to those experiences, both positive and negative, wherein we both experience our own human

[8]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 93.

[9]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 93.

limits (limit-to) as well as recognize, however, haltingly, some disclosure of a limit-of our experience.[10]

The theologian's interest in this "limit-situation" is with the idea that the Ultimate Limit is somehow trustworthy, finally beneficent and deserving of praise. Implicit in this awareness of our physical and ethical situation, there is a self-transcending logic of confidence, similar to that phrase from an older translation of Job: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him!"

Tracy's analysis of "common human experiences" with implicit religious meanings is not unlike Potthoff's own assessment of life experiences with religious implications, though certain differences between the two theologians are apparent. While many contemporary theologians hold with Tracy to an existentialist view of the human situation (estrangement, anxiety, alienation, guilt, etc.) counterbalanced by an intuitive "leap of confidence," Potthoff begins with a somewhat different understanding of "common human experiences" in which something of the original—almost pre-natal—sense of well being is the foundation of personal confidence in the ultimate goodness of things. Potthoff has never been persuaded by the "crisis" theologians that there is a fundamental split between God and human persons. Karl Barth said that he was pessimistic about man, optimistic about God. Potthoff affirms the goodness of God because he observes an essential condition of wholeness in human personality.

Feuerbach's comment that theology is anthropology, reflects, in part, modern theology's preoccupation with religious experience as a clue to the divine nature. As Potthoff indicated in his essay "Rethinking the Doctrine of Man" (written long before our concern over sexist language), he takes exception to orthodoxy's gloomy views of human nature. Not only is there a need to abandon the radical pessimism of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, along with neo-orthodoxy's appropriation of the doctrine of human depravity, but also to modify an equally dark picture of human nature in that generation of "realists" running from Machiavelli through Hobbes, Marx, and Freud. Not one of these thinkers, Potthoff claims, saw society or the group—let alone government—as products of human maturity. This is one reason, he feels, that existentialism's more recent affirmation of the individual finds these traditional views of human nature more useful than liberalism's late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century belief in human progress. Thus, existentialism is inclined to be preoccupied with extreme states of mind focusing on "guilt, dread, despair, and conflict as fundamental in human experience."[11]

While Potthoff admits to the evidence in support of these dark reviews of the human prospect, his own "doctrine of man"—and thus, his phenomenology of religious experience—reflects more recent inquiries into

[10]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 105.

[11]Harvey H. Potthoff, "Rethinking the Doctrine of Man," *The Iliff Review,* XVI, 2 (Spring 1959), pp. 15-16.

human nature drawn from the natural and social sciences, and, of course, from process metaphysics. New insights from these fields of thought indicate "a general meeting of minds" on a number of important points, namely, that human beings are "complex creatures" to be understood from a variety of perspectives rather than in terms of a "single substance" theory, that they are to be understood in "dynamic rather than static terms," as, in Gardner Murphy's phrase, "a flowing continuum of organism-environment events," that human beings are "in process of *becoming*" rather than products of a single line of cause-effect sequences, and, that human persons have the capacity for self-transcendence, for reaching beyond themselves toward "unknown spheres of reality."

Looking back on classroom discussions of these issues, I remember expressing the view that Potthoff had an optimistic bias in his doctrine of human nature. What I overlooked was his careful treatment of the tensions and polarities in human personality and his persistent refusal to sell creaturehood short by failing to account for greatness as well as depravity in his doctrine of human nature. On balance, nevertheless, there is an optimistic bias in Potthoff's theology, but I think this owes as much to his being a Christian as it does to his modernism. In fact, from earliest times, Christian theology has insisted upon the *imago dei* as one of its cardinal assumptions. The disputes, of course, from the days of Augustine and Pelagius to our own, center on the distance fixed between God and man in nature, through time and history. On this matter, Potthoff makes his own position clear. Human beings were not "born for ease, complacency, freedom from all tension." Rather, they have capacities "for a measure of growth and greatness, for the expression on the human level of the divine creative life which permeates the universe." Human beings are "metaphysically one with deity," reflecting "the image of God."[12]

Potthoff's anthropology of creativity and hope reveals certain basic notions concerning the nature of God. We come to knowledge of God, he argues, through "a critical analysis and interpretation of what is given in human experience."[13] In his essay "The Reality of God," Potthoff outlines the basic elements of the subjective pole of theology. Serious God-talk must proceed in a di-polar fashion, bringing together "the languages of designation and description, with the languages of personal confession of meaning. We must seek a merging of talk about the *fact* of God and the *meaning* of God in personal experience."[14]

Potthoff's beginning point is similar to Tracy's concept of "limit-to." In the first place, our experience of the world as human beings is both sustaining and threatening. As we grow and mature from childhood, the world gradually takes on the aspect of an "other," appearing at one time friendly, at another time hostile or indifferent to our welfare. While to some observers, like Ber-

[12]Potthoff, "Rethinking the Doctrine of Man," p. 20.

[13]Potthoff, "Rethinking the Doctrine of Man," p. 20.

[14]Potthoff, "The Reality of God," p. 11.

trand Russell, the "Real-Other" is "blind to good and evil," reckless and relentless in its destruction of cherished values, others find, or choose, a more hopeful response to the world about them. In other words, a *religious* response to the *fact* that we live in a world that both supports and destroys us is one in which we draw "courage, meaning and wholeness" from a *dynamic* context of events in which there is a good deal of suffering and defeat, but also much order, peace, serenity, and fulfillment. The older concepts of God as an "Agent-External" acting upon the world from a supernatural place are giving way, Potthoff asserts, to a more dynamic vision of God as that "comprehensive and intensive" reality—"the matrix of our being and the inescapable condition of our lives"—around which we seek to orient experience and to which we respond with trust and devotion.[15] Potthoff's argument, as I see it, is not that everyone responds to life with similar attitudes, but that the roots or essential elements of a religious, that is to say hopeful, response to life are "clues" to the nature of reality on a much larger scale, leading to basic theological notions about the ultimate character of things, about the reality and nature of God.

While there are important differences between Tracy's and Potthoff's phenomenological analysis of basic or common human experience—Tracy leaning toward existentialist categories, Potthoff toward wholistic and "process" interpretations—both theologians agree that theological reflection on questions concerning the nature and reality of God begin on the subjective side and move toward the objective ground of theism in a reality that is not ourselves. For Tracy, reflection upon the limit-character of human experience discloses a "religious dimension to all human experience," a dimension which in turn points toward a reality that functions "as a final, now gracious, now frightening, now trustworthy, now absurd, always uncontrollable limit-of the very meaning of existence itself."[16]

Potthoff takes a similar though noticeably different stance in his reflection upon the basic elements of human experience, theologically understood. The fundamental religious question, for Potthoff, is that of hope, or confidence in some enduring goodness at the heart of things. In effect, Potthoff takes his stand with St. Augustine's notion that "Being Itself" is Good, that all valuation regarding goods and evils rests upon the prior and given belief in what Schubert Ogden refers to as "the objective ground in reality itself of our ineradicable confidence in the final worth of our existence."[17] Potthoff writes:

> In life and death we keep coming to and coming up against inexorable conditions which are there, bringing both life and death, frustration, and a measure of fulfillment. *Is there hope in the presence of the way things ultimately are?* . . . In this framework

[15]Potthoff, "The Reality of God," pp. 10-11.

[16]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 108.

[17]Schubert Ogden, *The Reality of God* (Harper and Row, 1966), p. 37.

> of concern the God-idea refers to that in which men seek and find *trust and hope,* not only in the more usual events and experiences of life, but in the presence of the boundaries, limits, and basic conditions relating to our experience. . . . To speak the word 'God' out of personal experience is to affirm the coming of courage, meaning, wholeness, and hope in the presence of the deepest pain and the profoundest wonder of being human. The God-idea is that of the Ultimate-Real-Other experienced as faith and hope conferring.[18]

IV.

The second issue before us in this necessarily brief discussion of Potthoff's theological method is the question of the objective status of the "Ultimate-Real-Other." This sets aside, for the moment, the specifically "Christian" meaning of God-talk—a concern Tracy and Potthoff both take with utmost seriousness—and one dealt with in the next section of this essay.

It is no exaggeration to say that the "objective warrant" for religious language and reflection has become, once again, an issue of overriding theological importance. Eclipsed for a while by neo-orthodoxy's emphasis upon the revelational character of belief and a corresponding distrust of philosophical theology, the question of the ontological and metaphysical nature of religious language has again taken a central place in contemporary thought. As Tracy puts it, theism must possess *both* religious *and* cognitive meaning. "Without the truth of theism, religion tends to become an existentially useful but not cognitively serious question. The existential meaningfulness of the theistic question, to be sure, emerges only from an authentically religious base. But the final truth of religion . . . is in fact its objective ground in theism."[19]

The issue of God's objective reality is not a new one by any means and the history of this intellectual problem is enormously complex.[20] Nevertheless, it is important to briefly summarize the matter in an effort to understand Potthoff's theism.

The classical doctrine of God as "wholly other"—a God who exists apart from creation as that Being upon which the entire universe depends for its initial creation, *ex nihilo*; a God who, in Aristotle's term, is "pure actuality" and thus perfect in goodness, infinite power, immutable, impassible; a God, in short, existing in supernatural isolation from the world, originally disclosed in creation, and from time to time through extraordinary interventions—this

[18]Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life,* pp. 92-93.

[19]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 163.

[20]Tracy presents one of the best summaries of this issue in chapter 8, "The Meaning, Meaningfulness and Truth of God-Language," *Blessed Rage for Order.*

classical doctrine of God rests, in turn, upon theories of the nature of reality itself, and of human experience of the world.

One of the critical turning points in modern thought was Kant's critique of classical rationalism of the kind used by Aquinas in his arguments for the existence of God. Among other things, Kant argued that cause-effect sequences are projections of the way the human mind perceives reality, thus raising the questions about the "objective status" of our knowledge of the world about us. Kant's epistemological skepticism presaged a new field of inquiry, namely, the phenomenology of religious experience. While classical philosophers and theologians thought of experience broadly as "sense experience" in Aristotle's terms, Kant's questions about the status of knowledge of the world challenged the idea of the self as knower and drove epistemology to a moral or existential level. In his "turn to the subject," Kant was more interested in what he called "practical reason" (ethical or moral intelligence) than in "pure reason" (abstract or rational intelligence).

The implications of this "turn to the subject" for theism are profound. In the classical model, experience of the world rests upon too neat a distinction between self-as-knower and object-as-known, too fine a separation between "in here" and "out there." More recent theories of experience, reflecting the Kantian turn, provide a different understanding of experience. Rather than a kind of recording device of sense perception, the works of William James and John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead see the self as "moving, feeling, sensing, thinking, acting, deciding."[21] Likewise, new categories for understanding God emerge. To replace the static, non-relational categories of classical theism ("substance," "being," "causality"), the newer categories are more fluid, embracing process and sociality. The experiencing self moves through and participates in a larger nexus of occasions. Analogically, God is seen more as "creative interchange" in Wieman's language, as a kind of organizing signal within "the process of being and becoming" (Potthoff) rather than *Primus Causa* of the almost-infinite regress.

The critical issue for contemporary theism in this modern "turn to the subject" is how a language of religious experience correlates with those processes and realities to which such language claims reference. If classical theology posits the "existence" of *a* Being corresponding in reality to all of the language about such a God, then what kind of "existence" may be ascribed to God conceived in modern rather than classical categories? Recalling Tracy's "revisionist" claim that theological language, and hence all discourse about God, must be faithful to our common human experience and, implicitly, to contemporary understandings of the world and of human personality, it is clear that "simple" existence may not be ascribed to God as if, in Tillich's terms, God were *a* Being alongside other beings, albeit, the Greatest Being. The matter of God's existence in contemporary theology becomes, ironically, much less and much more than it was in classical theism. Contrary to what

[21]Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, p. 173.

critics of process theology have often claimed, a notion of God insisting that divine reality is both intensively and comprehensively related to the world—while appearing to be less God because not Absolute in some remote and distance sense—is much more God to be dealt with than before. For Tracy—and for Potthoff as well—the only appropriate analogy on the human level for God's nature is one that admits to the relational character of life. Any careful analysis of human experience shows that persons relate to others, to their environment, and to the larger world about them in very complex ways, in many dipolarities. We act and are acted upon. The world is changed and we are changed. To speak of the reality of God in this new context, then, is to speak of God as metaphysically dipolar in nature. Says Tracy:

> Given the fact that the basic metaphysical analogy for reality is the self and the self's own experience as intrinsically social and temporal, God too—precisely *as real*—is to be understood as social and temporal. More exactly, God as the eminently relative one is the perfect, and hence unique, instance in reality of creative becoming. God alone is supremely or eminently social and temporal. As such, God alone is related to all reality through immediate participation in a manner analogous to the self's immediate relationship to its own body.[22]

Elements of Potthoff version of God's dipolarity are evident in many of his essays and books. In his essay, "The Reality of God," Potthoff argues that the word "God" must refer to that aspect of things which provides for a "patterned process" of becoming. The word "pattern" implies a coherent order of meaning disclosed in the events of our experience—a coherence underlying and encompassing, as it were, the chaos and randomness we also experience. That the coherence is more fundamental, more inclusive than disorder is part of what it means to identify God with patterns of meaning, with what we might call an aesthetic apprehension of things. Pattern also implies limitation and freedom—a polarity, as Tillich puts it, of destiny and freedom. Rather than being imposed from the outside by a "divine orderer," however, "patterned process" is a *quality* of experience disclosed from within the dynamic givenness of things through which "we discern long-range trends, dependabilities, characteristics which suggest the model of pattern."[23] To be sure, living within a patterned process entails both creativity and destruction. "The real-other to which man is ultimately subject is both life-giving and life-taking. In a universe which is dynamic, relational and emergent, the processes of coming into being and dying are interrelated." Thus, Potthoff describes the larger implications of "patterned process" as a characteristic of reality as a whole:

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[22]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 181.

[23]Potthoff, "The Reality of God," p. 13.

> In a universe best characterized as dynamic, relational and emergent, nothing is wholly lost. The processes of dissolution are related to processes of re-creation, re-birth. The immortality of influence applies not only in the human scene but on the cosmic level. There is a working, of cosmic dimensions, which unites past, present and future, which links what has been to what is becoming, which functions in a conserving way even in the flux of events.[24]

Of course, the word "God" need not be ascribed to this particular set of characteristics, any more than to another more traditional set. For Potthoff, the word "God" is a name for "the 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."[25]

If, as David Tracy suggests, religion must be grounded in theism, and theism itself must make cognitive as well as existential sense; or, as Potthoff expresses it, if the reality of God consists of "facts" as well as "meanings," then how far can we go in the crucial matter of ascribing objective or designative or cognitive significance to the "Real-Other?" In speaking of the "Real-Other" by using newer forms and methods of understanding the universe rather than having recourse to the older theological metaphors of transcendence, have we moved beyond the subjective trap in Kant's "turn toward self," or have we simply substituted one kind of imagery for another in theology's perennial efforts to locate and name the reality or realities that seem to account in some final and ultimate sense for the way things are? When we move, in Potthoff's theology, from a catalogue of experiences of "meanings" (e.g., "the sense of the worth of life, the sense of having received life, the sense of the holy, the conviction of being judged and called into question, the experience of a sustaining, saving, delivering good . . . the sense of being called or summoned")[26] to a description of "the world" in terms of which these meanings are "grounded," have we achieved more cognitive credibility for the concept of God than in former times when the language of theology reflected much different world views? Or, have we simply reexamined and reinterpreted the basic concepts of religious belief in ways that more nearly reflect our present-day understandings of life? For Potthoff, it seems, the fundamental datum of religious experience, and thus, the basic clue to the nature of ultimate reality, is the human venture of hopefulness. He carefully elaborates the ways in which hope is grounded in the nature of reality itself and, thus, in the very nature of God. Indeed, it is here that we move in Potthoff's thought toward more explicitly Christian elements of his theology, toward the manner in which he explicates Christian teaching about God.

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[24]Potthoff, "The Reality of God," p. 14.

[25]Potthoff, "The Reality of God," p. 14.

[26]Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life*, p. 185.

V.

Professor Potthoff's work as a theologian has, from the beginning, reflected his commitment to the "apologetic" tasks of Christian theology. While important aspects of his thought are derived from sources other than Christian biblical and theological reflection—from social scientists and anthropologists and historians and astronomers—his work clearly shows that his primary task is to articulate Christian belief in ways that are intelligible and relevant for his contemporaries—inside and outside the churches. Recalling Tillich's notion that the Christian theologian moves back and forth between church and world, between religion and culture, between theology and philosophy—that the theologian stands sometimes within and sometimes outside the "theological circle"—there is a basic sense in which this model does not apply to Potthoff's theological style. He is, of course, as comfortable as Tillich with secular expressions of religious meaning and he can speak at length about historical and philosophical movements and about fields of scientific investigation lying outside the provinces of Christian reflection altogether. As a theologian, however, he is committed to the notion that the "theological circle" embraces every form and element of truth; as a *Christian* theologian, he is, appropriately, more modest, recognizing that Christianity is one of many religious systems of thought, but he is nevertheless certain that Christian faith provides a system of universal meanings that are, or must be, in touch with all sources of knowledge and with every human aspiration. Tillich's "method of correlation" recognizes the "boundary lines" between "gospel" and "world," while in many ways the sharp demarcations characteristic of boundaries fade in his (Tillich's) notion of religion as ultimate concern. Potthoff recognizes, of course, the difference between theology and other systems of knowledge and is less concerned about "boundaries" than about the integration of various forms of knowledge. Less sanguine about Christian orthodoxy than Tillich, Potthoff is more interested to demonstrate the reality of God as implicated in the fundamental wholeness of things and, for that reason, "worthy of trust and devotion," and to show how and why this basic insight concerning the way things hold together is compatible with Christian ideas about God. While he stands clearly within the Christian tradition and has always been one who speaks as a Christian, there is almost a sense in which, unlike Tillich, Potthoff wants to bring the world to the church and make the necessary connections *in ecclesia,* while Tillich moved in the other direction, "answering questions" derived from "the human situation." Ironically, perhaps, Tillich's method identifies him clearly as a "Christian" theologian, though he had very little connection with a particular denomination or congregation; Potthoff's method is less concerned about "Christian answers" to human questions, but his work *qua* theologian is intimately connected with his vital participation in a specific Christian community of faith. Both theologians have a deep respect for every form of human concern and meaning and believe that the quest for truth is a fundamentally religious quest. They differ

significantly, however, in their manner of relating the insights of Christian belief with these other systems of knowledge. For Tillich, the movement "back and forth" between theology and culture implies a fundamental distinction between theological and cultural provinces; for Potthoff, theological "movements" are more subtle, less concerned with "the Kerygma," more sensitive to disclosures of the divine in contexts than in "situations." Less the existentialist than Tillich, Potthoff nevertheless insists on the notion that God is present at the extremities of life as well as in the centers of meaning, though his emphasis as a theologian is on "the center that *does* hold," to paraphrase Yeats!

Potthoff's commitment to theology *in ecclesia* is evident in his claim that the church is primarily responsible to articulate a "gospel of hope." Nevertheless, his theological style and method are derived as much from his interests as a "process theologian" as from his commitments to Christian doctrinal propositions. It is not so much that he is skeptical of the creeds, let us say, as it is that he is certain the insights they contain need fresh articulation. These aspects of his theological style are evident in his discussions of the work of the church and the task of theology itself. Thus, in his analysis of the theme of the second assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954—"Jesus Christ—the Hope of the World"—Potthoff took issue with its traditional interpretations of the parousia while affirming its lasting relevance understood and set forth in more cogent terms. In that context, he writes of the purpose of the church and the tasks of theology:

> The central task of the Christian Church is to illuminate human experience with a realistic and relevant gospel of hope based on a religious interpretation of man and his universe . . . The persistent theme of the Christian Church is that God is real and God's character is such as to justify hope . . . Relevant theology always seeks to set forth doctrines of God and man consistent with available knowledge.[27]

Abandoning more orthodox interpretations of the Second Coming, Potthoff insists that many outside the church will be left unmoved by this doctrine and will wonder whether the church can address the modern seeker meaningfully. "Unless we wish to take an adventist doctrine literally, why should we cast the contemporary Christian message of hope in the framework of a doctrine of the Second Coming?"[28] For Potthoff, the central concern here for theology is *the fact* that human beings reach beyond themselves for fulfillment with the expectation that such hope is not in vain, that it is grounded in the nature of reality itself, and thus, in God. So the church must continually renew its language, telling its stories with an ear for fresh perspectives and contem-

[27]Potthoff, "The Churches Speak of Hope," *The Iliff Review,* XI, 3 (Fall 1954), p. 37.

[28]Potthoff, "The Churches Speak of Hope," p. 39.

porary understandings of the meanings they possess. "Neither the sense of historic continuity within a religious tradition, nor man's belief in God, is dependent upon the use of symbols which pre-suppose a world-view long outgrown. Too much contemporary theological writing encourages the use of a language which is useful only to those 'within the circle.' "[29]

One of the basic questions raised by this approach to theological revision is the extent to which traditional biblical and theological language and symbolism can be useful at all in an age that did not give that language birth. As one works through Potthoff's corpus, the theme of hope recurs with regularity, emerging long before it became the catchword of a post-neo-orthodox-orthodoxy. The important issue, however, is the degree to which Potthoff makes appropriate use, as a Christian theologian, of Christian language and symbolism in constructing his own "theology of hope." While our attention in this essay has focused more on the nature of theology and ways in which theological language is grounded in some ultimately dependable realities, it is also necessary to ask how a revisionist theology deals with the church as a community of faith and hope expressed in rituals of celebration, and prayer. While Potthoff is critical of orthodox supernaturalism, what do we make of traditional patterns and symbols of worship? Is it possible that the Holy Eucharist, celebrated in a high and solemn rite may provide a more eloquent and appropriate rendering of the Wholeness-Reality Potthoff describes than a liturgy stripped of propitiatory language and atonement theology? If we give assent to a revisionist concept of the dipolar nature of God, is it inconsistent to genuflect before the altar? Is it possible to accept a demythologized Christology, to recognize that the three-story universe of Heaven-Earth-Hell is no longer creditable, while being drawn by the beauty and mystery of a cathedral designed and built in an age that gave assent to that world view? Dom Gregory Dix was certainly correct when he wrote: "Prayer expresses a theology or it is only the outlet of a blind and shallow emotion."

Following Oliver Read Whitley's summary, Potthoff speaks of the church as "a community of remembering and reliving a community of rejoicing, and as a redeeming community."[30] He recognizes that the church must proclaim a vision of the world—"a vision of greatness which calls us out of apathy, which shakes us into the awareness that we have not been born for ease but for a measure of greatness, sharing in the divine work of creation and whole-making in human relations."[31] He argues that the church requires a heritage and tradition through which its people identify with a common mission and witness, that the church must express its vision, its history, its mission and witness in a language powerful enough to preserve and communicate these things. The question remains to what extent the inherited patterns of celebration and wor-

[29]Potthoff, "The Churches Speak of Hope," p. 49.

[30]Harvey H. Potthoff, "Styles in Churchmanship," *The Iliff Review,* XXXI, 3 (Fall 1974), p. 14.

[31]Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life,* p. 214.

ship are able to convey the central meanings of Potthoff's theological reconstruction.

In his *God and the Celebration of Life,* Potthoff affirms the contemporary relevance of Christian language. In chapters 15, "God as Ground, Grace, and Goal," and 16, "God and the Christian Experience of Hope," he wants to identify "basic Christian texts," in David Tracy's phrase—elements of tradition and teaching that abide in Christian theology—and to express these texts in ways that correlate with present-day knowledge and experience of the world and of our place in it. He writes:

> Fundamental to the Christian faith and way of life is the vision of God seeking to bring wholeness to man, in his inner life and in his relations with other men and with God. The God of Christian faith is a God whose creative power is declared in nature, whose redeeming love is made known in Christ, and whose active presence and summons to witness and service is experienced in his living Spirit. It is the Christian claim that the Christian vision illuminates the human situation with intelligibility, meaning, and hope. To walk in faith in the light of this vision is to walk in dignity and in the freedom to trust and hope and love. It is to be more whole as persons in relation to the whole of being. It is to be "more than conquerors" in the face of the most devastating experiences in human life. It is to be hopefully responsive to the challenges life presents.[32]

VI.

A concluding observation and question. David Tracy defines the revisionist theologian as one who is committed to "the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between . . . a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity."[33] As I see it, Potthoff exemplifies Tracy's revisionist model as a theologian seriously committed to the task of correlating Christian sensibilities drawn from tradition with contemporary thought forms and fields of investigation. An important question remains, however, concerning the "objective referent" of theology. If I understand both Tracy and Potthoff correctly, the issue relates to the difference between "reflections on the meanings of common human experience and basic Christian texts" in Tracy's case, and Potthoff's effort to move beyond reflection on "meanings" to the objective reality of God. I think Tracy is reconciled to a phenomenological approach to the question of God's objective reality while Potthoff is convinced that realities disclosed in the world, sustaining creativity and hope, are aspects of God's own essential nature as being and becoming.

[32]Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life,* p. 214.

[33]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 32.

The central difference between Tracy and Potthoff on this issue, it seems to me, is this. Following Charles Hartshorne's reinterpretation of the ontological proof for the existence of God, Tracy observes that the insight of this and other classical arguments is the *necessary affirmation* of "the reality of God" as the only way in which "our very understanding of ourselves as selves" and of "our primordial and unconquerable basic faith in the ultimate worthwhileness of our existence" may be validated. In other words, the reality of God is an inference, warranted by the very logic implicit in the experience of trust and confidence, in spite of all. Potthoff, on the other hand, wants more than this in claiming that God's reality, underlying our sense of meaning and hope in life, is objectively discernible in the patterns and processes of nature, life and history.

This issue is further extended by Gordon Kaufman when he insists that "God" is not the name of some reality given directly or immediately in perception or experiences, but indicates rather "a construct of the imagination which helps to tie together, unify and interpret the totality of experience."[35] In this view, theology is one of humankind's magnificent efforts to make sense of the world—predisposed to view things in an ultimate framework that says "yes" rather than "no" to our finest efforts and hopes. In this sense, the theologian is one who begins with the conviction that the heart of reality is benevolent, supportive, gracious, attempting to set this intuition in a coherent relation to all of the facts and values that constitute our tentative and partial understanding and apprehension of the world—*fides quaerens intellectum.* While Potthoff, I suspect, would partly agree with Kaufman's observation that the reality we call God is not "given *directly* or *immediately* in perception or experiences,"—he cites Whitehead's reference to "the intangible fact at the base of finite existence"—I think he also wants to find God in tangible, concrete events which are, in fact, directly perceived and experienced. Thus, Potthoff stands closer to Wieman than to Tracy, closer to Daniel Day Williams than to Schubert Ogden in the spectrum of "process theology."

The really interesting question, then, as I see it, is whether, in light of Potthoff's own claims, and in view of a sustained analysis of his thought, the "reality of God" is something more than a poetic gesture flung across the darkness—a "blessed rage for order;" something more than an inferential leap of faith; something, indeed, objectified in fact as well as experienced in faith.

[34]Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order,* p. 186.

[35]Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method,* p. 41.