THE MODES OF GOD'S CAUSAL ACTIVITY

CHARLES S. MILLIGAN

I. THE POSSIBLE CONCEPTUAL MODES

The purpose of this essay is to explore some of the problems involved in consideration of the nature of God's activity in the world. A better way to express that is "God's effective presence in the world," because the term "activity" suggests physical motion and expenditure of energy, which is entirely too limited a concept for dealing with this subject. In pursuing this topic I have Professor Potthoff's writings in mind, but will not deal with them in detail.[1] It is not to be inferred that the views expressed are ones he would agree with entirely, but I believe they are basically consonant with his theological position. In any case, what follows was stimulated by reflection on his writings.

There are four possible modes for conceiving God's causal efficacy: 1. That God acts directly and specifically to bring about particular results at sporadic intervals; 2. That God's activity is continuous and unvarying; 3. That God's activity was, is, and will be "outside time," or at least not present within history; 4. That God's activity is spiritual in nature, present in inspiration, comfort, ideal lure and the like, but not a physically efficatious cause. Now, clearly, there are combinations of these, which would require some modification of the bald categorical statements as they stand, but the list lends emphasis to the fact that there are sharply divergent views and may serve to sort out some of the issues.

Consider the features of the first position. Surely this is one of the most commonly held views in folk theology, that God is a being who periodically intervenes in natural processes to effect a particular result. Whether this is done by contravening natural law or by manipulation of natural forces in a non-natural way (assuming for the moment that such a statement could make sense), is beside the point. This view holds that by whatever methods, God acts in arranging things with physical effect so that I—or someone dear to me—is saved from some danger which would have befallen apart from that intervention.

The difficulty with this view is primarily that it raises havoc with our understanding of nature and its modes of operation. That problem was so acute in the days of Newtonian physics that some deists relegated God's activity to primordial creation, but it remains a problem both for common sense

CHARLES S. MILLIGAN is Professor of Philosophy of Religion, The Iliff School of Theology.

[1]William Tremmel's article in this issue does that admirably and illustrates how Dr. Potthoff's writings spark further thought.

understanding and sophisticated contemporary physics.[2] One can, of course, simply assert this position as a matter of faith and say, too bad for science. Even in that case, however, it raises the problem of evil in its most pernicious form. Here the problem is not mainly one of believing that God so conceived could act so as to save me—an admittedly attractive notion—but to ask why God did not so act as to save others, some of whom might conceivably have been more worthy and deserving. This is the cruncher: the very claim of God's action in one situation creates an excruciating problem of God's inaction in a hundred others.

I once heard an evangelist tell of being on a ship with a thousand on board. The ship sank and he alone was saved. God had saved him, he assured us, for this work and so that we might give generously in support of it. He did not comment on what the other 999 passengers might have thought about all this. "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it will not come near you." Let us grant that this is a view honored in tradition and popular today—especially among the privileged and lucky—but it does not take great imagination to see why it is wrong-headed and wrong-hearted. A typical rejoinder is "who do you think you are to question God's judgment?" oblivioius to the fact that it is not God's judgment but a very self-centered and stupid human theory that is being questioned.

I have gone into the special intervention theory not merely to disown it, but to recognize that that is precisely what many people think you mean when you speak of God's activity in the world. Indeed, some would say that if this is not what is meant, why bother with God and the paraphernalia of religion? One of Professor Potthoff's great contributions is that he has dealt with that question forthrightly and does not dissemble when it comes to making his position clear. Another is that he has given constructive content to God's reality in the world, providing intelligent and reverential theological interpretation in which religion transcends self-centeredness rather than justifying spiritual narcissism.

Before leaving the view of special intervention a comment may be in order about its psychological efficacy. After a close call it is virtually instinctive to exclaim, "thank God," "thank Goodness," "thank Heavens," or under stress or peril to utter desperate wishes for safe deliverance, however phrased. That is quite understandable and, in fact, human and wholesome. It is no more surprising than that we utter exclamations when we bark our shins on a chair in the dark. But it is no basis for constructing a seriously held theological position.

[2]See, e.g., H. H. Potthoff, *God and the Celebration of Life* (N.Y.: Rand, McNally, 1969), 120, 131, 135f., 140, and "Styles in Churchmanship," *Iliff Review,* XXXI (Fall, 1974), no. 3, pp. 7-9, "Life Styles in Theological Perspective," *Iliff Review,* XXX (Fall, 1973), no. 1, sec. II.

II. IN TERMS OF THE CLASSICAL VIEW

Aristotle's analysis of causality remains a useful tool for some purposes despite many flaws. Inevitably we speak at times of efficient and final causes, just as we use his language of essence, substance, attribute and the like, without for a moment believing in his physics or metaphysics. In his familiar analysis there are four types of cause:[3] 1. The material cause is the stuff out of which something is made or comes to be, such as the bronze that is cast into a statue; 2. The formal cause, which is the pattern and attributes that come to characterize the thing being caused; 3. The efficient cause, which is the force brought to bear upon the material, as the sculptor applies his energy directly upon the matter being shaped; 4. The final cause, which is the function or purpose to be fulfilled, or as Aristotle says, "that for the sake of which."

This four-fold analysis at the least reminds us that however explicated there are different sorts of causes which function in distinctly different ways and furthermore that apart from a plexus of types of operational factors, specific entities would not come into being. Popular thought is entirely too inclined to limit the conception of causality to efficient causes, perhaps because as individuals acting upon resistant materials that is the way we naturally see ourselves. The purposive application of energy occupies a distinctive role in human affairs, but for that reason it becomes necessary to remind ourselves that in the given order of existence the child does not build a sand castle without sand and the capacity of moist sand to be shaped. As obvious as it is that human intention shapes ends, the materiel being shaped by the artist or statesman or parent often contributes in decisive ways to the final result.[4] One of the clearest examples of this is found in the way that the character development in a novel or drama takes on something of a life of its own and many an author has been surprised to see the direction the story has taken.

These commonplace observations suggest that a similar error of anthropomorphic projection has afflicted popular religious thought. That is, many people conceive God as an agent of efficient cause, and mainly that. This misconception is aggravated by such pious language as "the acts of God" and "the mighty deeds of God." Of all Aristotle's types of cause, it seems to me that efficient cause is the least applicable to God. If so, it then becomes extremely important to perceive how in other ways God is efficatiously involved in the character and events of the world, including one's human career.

Staying with Aristotle's scheme, but modifying it somewhat, as regards material cause, God is (or may be conceived as) present in that which is given, as the stuff and shape of the past out of which the present takes its definite form. It is the character momentum of time. God is actually present and deter-

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[3]. *Physics,* II, 3; *Metaphysics,* V. 2.

[4]Thus Stravinski: "in art as in everything else you can build only upon a firm resisting foundation." For an extended discussion of the interaction between artist and material see John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (N.Y.: Minton, Balch, 1934), chaps. 2 and 4.

minative in the givenness of the materiel and stability of that facticity which the past presents to a present duration. This, to be sure, broadens Aristotle's concept of matter so as to include vector character and attributes, but Aristotle's "matter" bears little resemblance to our conception. The brute fact that the world is, that what has been has been, constitutes the ground of being and becoming, of potentiality and delimitation, within which any particular existent can be, act, or have meaning.

The word "providence" has often meant direction toward a fortunate, if obscure, future, for which governance might be a better term. But if providence be taken to mean the providing reality, the givenness of existence—i.e. the world and its character—that strikes me as giving much richer meaning to "the providence of God." This actual givenness is not a being behind phenomena, but simply *is,* confronting us at every step, in every thought, through every relationship. This is God as material cause. It confronts us and envelopes us as pantheistic, which is not the whole story but an inescapable part of it, and with which in some fashion we have to come to terms. It says something important about your religion if when you say "earth" you are thinking something like biosphere/noosphere (or a living reality permeated in part by culture and thought) or you mean lifeless dirt, rocks, rivers and concrete. To deny God in the sense of this givenness is to deny the earth as habitat and to see it as mere staging. Many thoughtful and devout souls have been sensitive to this providing, life-affirming, nurturing and delimiting presentation of reality, expressed in various ways in divergent theologies. For example, Bonhoeffer's celebrated words: "I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, or the reality of the world without the reality of God." Were there no other form of awareness of reality than this gift—the world and life in it—despite the harshness and indifference of nature, it would be some basis for awesome wonder and poignant gratitude.

As regards formal cause, we must depart even further from Aristotle's definition. However, insofar as form in the classical sense meant that by which a thing is known and characterized ("by reason of which the matter is some definite thing"), the formal cause corresponds more or less to Whitehead's primordial nature of God or principle of concretion. It is the whole interrelated order of conceptualization of the potentialities of everything: the graded envisagement of the eternal objects.

> . . . we must provide a ground for limitation which stands among the attributes of the substantial activity. This attribute provides the limitation for which no reason can be given: for all reason flows from it. God is the ultimate limitation, and His existence is the ultimate irrationality. For no reason can be given for just that limitation which it stands in His nature to impose. God is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality. No reason can be

> given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality.[5]

God, then, as primordial is the conceptual order of things, actual and potential. All things flow and become, but there is discernible character and regularity and differentiability about things. There is "the happy eachness of all things," as Auden said. As in respect to material cause where God is present as brute factuality, so here in respect to formal cause God is subsistent—inferentially known—not existent. We are led to acknowledge this dimension of God by reason and the very possibility of any reasoning at all. This corresponds to what some theologians have called the mind of God. I find that too anthropomorphic, but to the extent that it suggests the subsistent reality which functions in terms of the whole range of structure and potentiality of the cosmos (about which we obviously know little, but which we presuppose in all knowledge and conceivable possible knowledge), I regard it as a necessary metaphysical notion or heteroscopic construct.

As regards final cause, the teleological or end-realization mode of God's effective presence in the world, theologians differ widely in their interpretations. Despite the differences there is substantial agreement (except where creation is regarded as evil or illusory) that historic and biological processes are characterized by directionality and culminations of value, which, after all, is an observable matter if you have any theory of value at all, but the interpretations are not observable and remain a matter for reasonable debate. Professor Potthoff invariably states his conclusions in terms that recognize the interpretative element here:

> To speak of the most inclusive matrix of our existence in terms of patterned process is to suggest the element of directionality in the eventfulness of the universe . . . it suggests that on the various levels of existence directionality appears to prevail over randomness . . . On the organic level we discern the presence of inner thrust, aspiration, "subjective aim." Life seeks expression and fulfillment.[6]

In the nineteenth century the two developments that contributed to a naturalistic teleology—in contrast with Hegelian—were evolution and depth psychology. The theories of natural selection, adaptation, and symbiosis opened the way for theological interpretations far removed from Paley's notion of God as a sort of cosmic mechanic. Psychoanalysis contributed the idea of unconscious motivation, i.e., that purposes are characteristic of behavior which are other than conscious, ego-defined objectives. Whether or not the word

[5] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern Morld* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1925), 256 f.
[6] "The Reality of God," *Iliff Review,* XXIV (Spring, 1967), 2, p. 13.

"purpose" is used, the directional character of biological life is not exclusively the attribute of conscious intentionality; in fact, it may be opposed to and stronger than the purposes of the conscious mind. It is significant that these general ideas, as I have described them, were not limited to Darwin and Freud, but were current among other thinkers. Such ideas belonged to the nineteenth century and marked a great turning point in the development of human understanding. In teleology it shifted "from special design in the products to directivity in the process, and plan in the primary collocations," as F. R. Tennant put it.[7]

Of course developments in more recent decades have expanded our understanding of the patterns and dynamic interrelations of natural phenomena to a fantastic degree. Paley was right in his claim that the intricacies and subtle coordinations of nature far surpass human ingenuity; he was merely mistaken in his main point as to how this has come about. The sciences do not establish any particular theory of "final causes" or teleology. They do seem to make some more plausible than others and perhaps it is not too much to say that some ancient theories are now discredited. And the sciences, surely, have enriched the data for viewing the cosmos with wonder and pious admiration by those disposed to such a view.[8] From such a perspective God is present—and actively and effectively determinative—in the patterned directionality of reality.

III. MOVING BEYOND CLASSICAL CONCEPTS

It is necessary to make a few comments about causality, for there is no consensus about that. The model of simple mechanical cause-effect, of course, no longer stands. And it is quite possible to deny any theory of causality, but I cannot help observing that those who do so seem to run into self-contradictions. Hume noted that we cannot observe the "power" of causality, i.e. we cannot see or touch the actual transmission of effectiveness that passes from a causal phenomenon to the affected consequence. True enough. We infer such a relationship and Hume was skeptical of all inferential reasoning and the assumptions essential to it. How does this idea of causality come about? It is the result of the association of ideas and habit. Note that "it is the result of . . ." Here in his psychology Hume assumes that causation is real. Yet nowhere in all his writings, so far as I have been able to discover, did Hume observe that he was making the very assumption in psychology that he was denying in physics, as it were. "Necessity" (i.e. causal connection), he says, "is

[7]F. R. Tennant, *Philosophical Theology,* Vol. II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), chap. 4. Tennant, like Hocking and Brightman, denied the possibility of "unconscious purpose," in opposition to the view I am supporting, and which may be found in Teilhard's notion of "groping" and Sir Alister Hardy's *The Living Stream: Evolution and Man* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1965).

[8]This has been a favorite theme of Dr. Potthoff's, e.g. "God and the Newer Views of the Universe," *Iliff Review,* Vol. XVI (Fall, 1959), 3, pp. 46 f.

the *effect* of this observation" (i.e. of "several resembling instances, which give rise to the idea of power").[9] And again, he speaks of "the *force* of habit" in affecting our thinking. What I am pointing to is that he easily assumed causal relations in matters of experience and the understanding of it, when the causality there is no more directly observable than it is in objective phenomena. But it would be difficult to take seriously anyone who adopted the view that I am suggesting Hume should have in order to remain radically consistent. This is by way of suggesting that while some notion of causal relatedness is necessary, it is a presupposition.

Professor Potthoff has frequently discussed this. For example:

> Thus, we are giving up the old mono-causal, linear conception in favor of a field conception in which everything is both cause and effect. Reality is forever shaping itself out of the inter-play of forces. Thus, we think of causality in contextualistic terms.[10]

With regard to our present subject, what this comes down to is that God's effectual activity in the world is not destroyed by eliminating either the concept of a Cosmic Mr. Fixit or the Architect-Engineer of the Universe. It is not so much that that being has been disproved as that that notion of causality no longer stands up. In terms of what Potthoff calls "dynamic contextualism," God as causally and efficatiously present and active throughout reality is still true, and that, I submit, in ways more profound and marvelous than ever.

Part of the difficulty is linguistic. The word "causality" might easily be taken to denote a "thing" which bears that name. And clearly there is no such "thing" as causality. The effectual relations whereby factors entering into an event have a determinative or conditioning consequence upon the outcome is real and a given characteristic of phenomena. That is the necessary presupposition for explaining any phenomenon. There are not only difficulties of expressing metaphysical realities of this nature in words, there are difficulties in conceptualizing them. Yet as operational universals they seem to be necessary in some form. Quite possibly some of the most important truths are most elusive and resistant to satisfactory explanation because they are so much and so intimately pervasive in everything that is, "closer than breathing and nearer than hands and feet."

IV. DIVERSE UNIVERSES OF DISCOURSE IN ONE UNIVERSE

At this point I can well imagine such a response as this: "Even if someone agreed with all that has been said, why in the world call this reality 'God' ?" I

[9] *The Treatise of Human Nature,* Book I, sec. 8, 12, 14. Italics added.

[10] "God and the Newer Views of the Universe," 46.

can imagine it because I have often heard it. It is a legitimate and important question. I have a quiver full of answers to shoot back, but will limit the present response to one: it is a legitimate orientational perspective, and "God" is, for me, the appropriate term, because I hold this perspective in a religious orientation.

In other words, it is an interpretation. All experience, as John Hick has noted, involves some form of interpretation to be rendered intelligible. "The perceiving mind is thus always in some degree a selecting, relating and synthesizing agent, and experiencing our environment involves a conscious activity of interpretation."[11] There are different forms, plans and explanatory principles in different interpretational schemes. That a corporation can be analyzed and interpreted accurately in fiscal terms does not eliminate the possibility of giving a personnel account of it. Yet many pious folk presume that, say, an astro-physicist's account of the cosmos cannot be true if a theological one is. Or, per contra, we find modern sophists who presume that because there are different perspectives that are legitimate, you have license to adopt any interpretation you want on any field. That there are diverse interpretations does not at all eliminate the necessity for criteria of warrantability and justification.

This has a bearing on God's causal activity, because of the mistaken supposition that if other factors than God are explanatory of the character of an event, then it must be the case that either God's causal involvement is fictitious or God's activity is redundant in violation of Occam's razor, yet in some strange way real. It strikes me that history provides a parallel for clarifying this. As everybody knows, a given historical entity like the Constitution can be (and has been) analyzed from many different perspectives, some better than others. Obviously that one traces the political theory that went into it does not discredit another which analyzes the political forces and maneuvers that took place. However, an account that claimed to be the only true analysis, disregarding all other legitimate perspectives, would be committing the reductionist error. It would conceivably be legitimate in one context to say that Madison made a certain contribution and in another to say that the Colonies through their delegates did it. I do not know if that illustration is helpful, but I suggest that along the same lines of thought it is possible to say the following and not be guilty of self-contradiction: 1. The blood transfusion brought about a restoration of health. 2. The physician cured the patient's condition. 3. God, who is the power of healing, healed the patient. Each statement would depend on the context and perspective for its legitimacy and meaning.[12]

[11]"Religious Faith as Interpretation," in John Hick, ed., *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion,* 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 499.

[12]The law of parsimony, even as held by Newton and Kant, remains valid, but the utilization of it becomes more complicated since we recognize different "universes of discourse" in ways they did not.

Gilbert Ryle's famous analysis of the "category mistake" can be applied, for understanding presupposes correct category reference. The mistake is illustrated by the man who was shown one college after another in England and who then asked, "but where is the University?" Or the person who was taken to see a parade and afterwards said, "I saw many people marching but I never did see the parade." Now the word "God" is a religious term and presupposes a religious perspective and orientation. That does not invalidate other perspectives nor does it grant permission to claim anything you want under the God-talk label.

V. TWO UNUSUAL BLIKS

In order to emphasize the significance of the interpretive framework, I will draw upon two contrasting perspectives, one ancient and one modern. The ancient one is Madhyamika Buddhism, a variety of Mahayana which emerged ca 150 A.D. The poet Santideva (ca 900 A.D.) wrote a summation of this theology in what is said to be very expressive and elegant verse. It is that version that I am following.[13] A few statements borrowed from the translator, Marion L. Matics will establish enough of this elaborate system to comprehend the orientation for present purposes. The underlying assertion is that "nothing can be asserted, other than the ridiculousness of one's opponents," although as we shall see, there are assertions made. "If we understand what thought (*citta*) really means, we understand everything phenomenal, up to and including the Bodhisattva." "It is not only to understand all things, but it is to be all things. It is to become oneself the Mind of the Bodhisattva, and then to realize that there is no Mind, and that there is no Bodhisattva." The world is illusion or appearance, not reality, and deliverance from the bonds of attachment to things of mere appearance is achieved by correct understanding, i.e. Enlightenment.

The cause of sorrow is attachment to things of the world and other persons and the desire for selfhood. In order to develop attitudes of non-attachment, Santideva recommends viewing the bodies of living persons as more truly corpses which are temporarily mobile producers of excrement. A few quotations will serve to indicate this view.

> When shall I compare my body, the bearer of decay, with other skeletons, after going to my own cemetery? This body of mine will become so putrid that even jackals will not be able to prowl near to it because of its stench. (#30-31)

[13] *Entering the Path of Enlightenment—The Bodhicaryavatara of the Buddhist Poet Santideva* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1970). The quotations from Matics' introduction are pp. 28-30; quotations in the next paragraph are from Book VIII on "The Perfection of Contemplation," pp. 196-200 in this edition. It must be remembered that this is only one aspect of this theology and there is another, and an ennobling one, on compassion.

> Saliva and excrement are born from the same source—from food! Since excrement is unpleasant to you, how can the drinking of saliva [in a kiss] be so precious? (49) . . . why embrace again a cage of bones fastened with sinews and completely smeared with the filth of flesh? (52)
>
> Having seen many skeletons, you find that a cemetery is disgusting to you: But you delight in a village, which is a cemetery filled with walking skeletons. (70)

Such a way of perceiving, it must be conceded, would have a chilling effect on attachments. There are other passages that state the poet's view in stronger and more vivid terms.

What is important for our purposes is to realize that life can be viewed through this interpretation. It is not without any basis, for our bodies do produce saliva and excrement, and mortality is our common lot. You can—if you wish—claim that the purpose of it all is the production of sewage systems and population of cemeteries, and I do not see how that interpretation could be disproved, although I would insist that when it claims to be the only legitimate perspective it is profoundly wrong. My guess is that there are people who have never heard of Santideva who in effect view life pretty much this way.

The modern example is drawn from Richard Dawkins' book, *The Selfish Gene.*[14] A gene is "any portion of chromosomal material which potentially lasts for enough generations to serve as a unit of natural selection." (p. 30) Once again a few random quotations will indicate the perspective. "A gene travels intact from grandparent to grandchild, passing straight through the intermediate generation without being merged with other genes." (35 f) The genes "are the replicators and we are their survival machines. When we have served our purpose we are cast aside. But genes are denizens of geological time: genes are forever." (37) I am reminded of Bertrand Russell's comment many years ago that from the point of view of an egg a hen is an excellent device for the production of more eggs.

Surely we can enter into Dawkins' perspective sufficiently to see the legitimacy of it for his purpose of popularizing the fascinating account of genetic functions. In fact, I do not think the full impact of the book can be gained without adopting that perspective. Yet put in terms of the only really true perspective, it would be reductionist. It amuses me that at the conclusion he has to introduce a rather strange concept of "meme," to account for human ideas and ideals that are not adequately explained by the blind selfishness of replicating genes, in order to preserve his position of genetic determinism. All I am concerned to point out here is that Dawkins' interpretive scheme, like Santideva's, is a legitimate one but does not invalidate others.

[14]N.Y.: Oxford, 1976.

Furthermore, a religious interpretation of human existence must, as Professor Potthoff has insisted, take into account other perspectives; it must, so to speak, be in dialogue with knowledge from any quarter that has bearing on its claims; and for intellectual integrity it must not deal irresponsibly with available truth or claim immunity from science and critically examined experience.

> If the God concept emerges, in some significant sense, through reinterpretation of experienced events; and if God refers to that dynamic reality fundamentally implicated in the course of events; the ultimate ground of hope, then the data we have been considering [from science] have something to say to us about God.[15]

VI. AND OTHERS CALL IT GOD

To return to the question, why call this God?, the reasons are, first, that this reality is held to be objectively real. It is not believed to be a figment of the imagination or projection of subjective needs. Quite possibly I am mistaken in some of my views about it, but I do not mean for it to be understood as a leap of faith into the dark or merely my vision of ideals and hope. The Character of the Universe is discernible in part. By and large when people have used the term God they have believed in the reality to which the word applied.[16] That is the first requirement. The second is that the concept of this reality is held in a perspective that is characterized by devoutness, gratitude, and kinship. The third is that this perspective is articulated in relation to a particular heritage (Judaeo-Christian in my case), in fellowship with a community of shared values and commitments; in short, in a religious context. Other terms may be used for this reality, especially when trying to think clearly about aspects of it, but the only adequate evocative term for all aspects taken together is God. The fourth reason is that, God help me, this is the way I see things; it is the central and organizing concept when struggling with matters of meaning and ultimacy. These reasons do not add up to any reason why someone who disagrees or someone who has no interest in religion should call the organizing, creative, redeeming, indwelling character of reality "God." They do add up to sufficient justification for those who hold such views in a religious context of interpretation.[17] It is to that subject, interpretation, that I now turn.

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[15]"God and the Newer Views of the Universe," 47.

[16]Potthoff's term for this is the "Real-Other." He characteristically stresses the dipolar nature of theology where both the objective and subjective poles are necessary. E.g., "The Reality of God," 14 ff. and *Loneliness—Understanding and Dealing with it* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 116 ff.

[17]Potthoff discusses this in some detail in *God and the Celebration of Life,* chap. 3.

VII. THEOLOGY AS DISCIPLINED INTERPRETATION

It remains that the religious envisagement *is* an interpretation, a way of viewing, relating, responding and valuing events, observations and ourselves. It is an orientation which makes a great difference in the way we see life, for it is enriched with our personal affirmation.

> It is out of such revelatory experiences . . . that the distinctive language of faith and devotion emerges. God is mystery—but his presence is known and declared. Human language is inadequate, but one is constrained to speak—often in the language of analogy—of what is surpassingly important. So it has been and is for those who take the name of Christian; in an actual historical life—a life of self-giving love centered in God—the glory of God, not only as creative power but as redeeming love, is declared. In the light of this vision and mediation all things are seen in a different way. In affirmation of the meaningfulness of existence is the practical affirmation of the reality of God.[18]

Faith has been identified with blind belief without basis or with intellectual assent to a set of propositions or a creed. But increasingly writers of sensitive perception have regarded faith as an orientation and interpretation: a way of viewing things. To cite some familiar examples: Teilhard began his major work as "an attempt to see" and said that "the whole of life lies in that verb"—seeing. That is the point of *The Phenomenon of Man.* John Dewey pointed out that our concept of anything in its wholeness includes imagination.

> The unification of the self throughout the ceaseless flux of what it does, suffers, and achieves, cannot be attained in terms of itself. The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe.[19]

It requires "an orientation that brings with it a sense of security and peace. The particular interpretation given to this complex of conditions . . . is derived from the culture with which a particular person has been imbued." Whitehead, in that most famous passage, used "*vision*" as the central term: "Religion is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind, and within,

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[18]"The Reality of God," 17 f. Cf. H. H. Potthoff, *A Whole Person in a Whole World* (Nashville: Tidings, 1972), Part 3, "The Experience of God."

[19]*A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale, 1934). The reference I have at hand is Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy* (N.Y.: Modern Library, 1939), p. 1016, and the following quotation is p. 1012.

the passing flux of immediate things . . . The religious vision . . . is our one ground for optimism."[20] Martin Buber called this the perspective of the I-thou relation.

> For to step into pure relation is not to disregard everything but to see everything in the *Thou*, not to renounce the world but to establish it on its true basis. To look away from the world, or to stare at it, does not help a man to reach God; but he who sees the world in Him stands in his presence.[21]

J. H. Randall, in a similar vein, says that religious symbols serve as instruments of revelation, of vision—

> of a vision of the powers and possibilities in the world . . . They lead to a vision of man in the world, of the human situation in its cosmic setting . . . still speaking symbolically, God may well be for us the total order of that which has the power to evoke such vision.[22]

R. M. Hare coined the term "blik" to get at the notion of interpretation as orientational envisagement. "Without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *bliks* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation."

These examples remind us that people who have held quite different religious views have in common the claim that what marks religion as authentic is possessing an interpretive orientational framework through which life is viewed, understood and given direction. John Hick calls this a matter of "finding" ourselves interpreting the data of experience in certain ways. "We are aware that we live in a real world, though we cannot prove by any logical formula that it *is* a real world." So, too, with an ethical orientation.

> The same is true of the apprehension of God. The theistic believer cannot explain how he knows the divine presence to be mediated through his human experience. He just finds himself interpreting his experience in this way.[24]

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[20]*Science and the Modern World* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 191 f.

[21]*I and Thou*, excerpted in Hick, *cit. sup.*, p. 303. An extraordinary example of interpretative vision along these lines is that of Mother Teresa, who sees each leper she encounters in Calcutta as Christ. This does not mean that she discounts or denies the leper's suffering and disfigurement, but because of it interprets the leper as an embodiment of the divine.

[22]*The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1958), chap. 4. Cf. Potthoff, *The Inner Life* (Nashville: Graded Press, 1969), 109 f.

[23]Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1955).

[24]J. Hick, *cit. sup.*, 506.

In a way this is similar to the ontological argument, not as a proof, but as an admission that this is the blik which makes sense to oneself.

One further comment is necessary with regard to using the term God: although there are many modes of God's presence or causal activity, which can be analyzed in various ways, these modes are analytic devices. The modes are, in reality, all contained or interrelated in one unity. That is not to say they are lost in an homogenized sameness, but expressions of a unity like that of *a* person with integrity, *a* cohesive work of art that contains dissonance and diversity, or *a* civilization that has definite character.

The full task of explicating an "interpretation" in the sense intended here would be lengthy, perhaps unending. It is precisely to that task that Professor Potthoff has devoted so much thought and work. For the theologian's task is not only philosophical and apologetic. The theologian to some extent must fill out the faith view that is held so that it relates to a heritage in an illuminating way and communicates to the faith community with genuine significance in the lives of people. In *Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan introduced a character named Interpreter, who explained things to Christian and told him to "keep all things so in thy mind." When Christian left him to continue his life journey, he said: "Here I have seen things rare and profitable;/Things pleasant, dreadful, things to make me stable . . . let me be/Thankful, O good Interpreter, to thee." A multitude of us would echo a similar sentiment toward Harvey Potthoff, who has been and is such an interpreter. It may be presumptuous for me to put it this way, but I think at least to some extent that his primary task has not been to interpret theology (although he can do that ably when necessary), but to interpret *life* through the theological vision.

Of the many passages exemplifying that in the writings of Professor Potthoff, the following words taken from *God and the Celebration of Life* are typical.

> To see one's own life and that of other human beings in this light [i.e. of God as the Wholeness-Reality] is to discern sanctity in existence and in the human enterprise. It is to know the worth of being alive as a person. It is to discover a firm basis for self-acceptance and self-affirmation. To accept the gift of life in this light is to celebrate the gift of one's own uniqueness as a human being. It is to worship the God of life.[25]

[25] *Op. cit.*, 233. Two additional comments, added since this was set in type: 1. It should be noted that in the discussion of the Madhyamika viewpoint it was not possible to include several accent markings that really should be in the proper nouns. 2. I believe there are some interesting points of clear disagreement between Professor Coburn's conclusions and my own, which there was neither time nor space to explore, but which would provide a basis for lively discussion.