

The Reasoning Heart: Toward a North American Theology

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Contemporary North American theology derives much of its inspiration and a number of its categories from Continental and South American sources. Protestant thought remains enmeshed in the neo-orthodox and strident stance of Karl Barth who distanced theological dogmatics from philosophic reflection and construction. Barth's radical rejection of human religiosity and the culture that sustains it forced theology to retreat from modernity into a private and idiosyncratic revelation. This flight from philosophy and culture has enabled Protestant thought to generate and sustain a position of prophetic protest but has cut it off from the deeper needs of the human communities that require a more integrated theological stance. Catholic theology has often vacillated between a profound sensitivity to the emancipatory forces working among the poor in Latin America and an epistemologically driven neo-Thomism that attempts to integrate the transcendental turn of Kant with the substance metaphysics of Aquinas. While the Catholic perspective has remained free from the worst excesses of Barthian neo-orthodoxy, it has, like its Protestant counterpart, failed to address the problems of modernity as they relate to secular communities.

The chief virtue of this book of essays, all written by Catholic theologians, is in realigning theology toward the classical American tradition rather than toward those of Europe or South America. This is not to say, of course, that liberation theology does not remain a serious and much needed challenge to North American insensitivity and economic privilege. Nor is it to say that the Continental perspectives of Rahner, Gilson, Schillebeeckx, and others are without relevance to the development of an indigenous North American theology. It is to say that the philosophic perspectives of Edwards, Peirce, Royce, James, Hocking, Whitehead, and Meland are fertile sources for a theological transformation that will reestablish the intimate correlation between theology and the claims and aspirations of science and culture.

Drew Christiansen, in his overview of the essays in the volume,

lists four traits that he holds to be constitutive of American philosophy. The first is its emphasis on experience broadly conceived. The second is its insistence that affective life is directly related to meaning and truth. The third is the privileging of the aesthetic realm over other normative domains. The fourth is the emphasis on the pragmatic issue of all valid conceptual structures. Of the four traits, experience is held to be the most encompassing. Out of the broadened concept of experience comes a logic of the affects that entails a social and cultural expression for individual experience.

Within the heart of experience lies a hunger for conversion that serves to actualize the potencies slumbering within the self. Several of the writers in this volume redefine the concept of conversion to strip it of its more narrowly evangelical Protestant connotations. Donald Gelpi, in particular, locates Catholic charismatic movements against the background of the 18th and 19th century revivals that stressed private party religion and narrowly defined nationalism. While the concept of conversion operates in both contexts, it is held to be more fully and richly developed in those Catholic charismatic movements that stress the integration of feeling, thought, and action. Gelpi uses an expanded version of Peirce's pragmatic maxim to analyze the inner logic of conversion. On the deepest level, conversion implies assent to beauty. He states, "Peirce, like Edwards, believed that the spontaneous attractiveness of divine beauty motivates initial religious assent. He also believed that every human being ought in addition to seek to understand how to cultivate habits of emotional growth that foster and sustain such consent" (p. 34). In responding to the *summum bonum* the individual overcomes the dualisms of pre-conversion life. This conversion is not merely the shift in horizons but the development of a new normative frame of reference.

Gelpi persuasively argues that the pragmatic maxim casts new light on the social and political effects of personal conversion. Peirce, unlike Dewey, understood the deeper dimensions of the aesthetic and recognized their correlation to the growth of concrete reasonableness in the divine. For William Spohn, the basis of moral evolution or conversion lies in the above-mentioned "logic of the affects." Discernment is the reason within the heart that makes it possible to assess and respond to the invitation of God. The discerning self is embedded in a loyal community and lives within and

through the symbols of that social group. Our self-identity comes from the wealth of symbols within which we live. To change our moral actions we must first change our self-image. Such images govern the subsequent choices and habits of moral life. For Spohn, the communal theories of Royce and H. Richard Niebuhr serve to illuminate the logic of discernment and the consequent moral evolution of the self.

John Stacer reverses the usual procedure whereby reflection moves from finite human experience toward the divine by attempting to show how God comes toward the self as a divine presence. This presence enables us to find our better self and to act more responsibly than would be possible without such empowering presence. His corollary to the state of Sin is the psychic numbing that makes it difficult to experience the suffering of others. Basing his reflections on the thought of Hocking and Whitehead, he argues that God cherishes and appreciates each self inviting it toward a "unity of adventure" with the divine. Since God fully participates in the human drama, with all of its attendant suffering, it follows that the self has a source of comfort that is not limited to the finite. On the positive side, God fosters value and uses persuasion rather than coercion to transform human communities. For Stacer, God, while in some senses immutable, is also fully available to the struggling self in search of meaning and empowerment.

The centrality of community is clear to all of the writers in this text. For Frank Oppenheim, Royce's analysis of the grace-filled beloved community stands as the paradigm for all accounts of our religious and social existence. Such communities slumber within the heart of mere natural communities and live as the lure for moral transformation. Conversion involves an individual, a saving community, and the Spirit of that community. Oppenheim places a great deal of emphasis on the role of Spirit in helping us to love graced communities. Our traditional metaphysics placed too much emphasis on the reality of individuals and thereby failed to understand the equal reality of graced communities. The concept of the graced or beloved community has universal application. Oppenheim goes so far as to state, "At its own level, then, the created universe should be a beloved community and one fittingly composed of an ascending series of finite beloved communities." (p. 112)

The method of the beloved community is that of "interpretive musement". Such musement is rooted in love and serves to deflate absolutist claims. Like Stacer, Oppenheim sees musement as a key to the process of personal and social conversion. Musement is generative of novelty and openness and ultimately leads us to reflection on the divine natures. Both Peirce and Royce used interpretive musement to enrich their general hermeneutic theories. Oppenheim correctly locates musement within the structures of the loyal community of interpreters.

The concept of method is further elaborated by J. J. Mueller. He uses Meland's concept of "appreciate knowledge" to show how an aesthetic appreciation of creative passage makes it possible for us to participate in God's redemptive energy. He correctly takes Dewey to task for failing to understand the non-instrumental aspect of appreciation. More importantly, Mueller firmly rejects the neo-orthodox restriction of God to one narrow and clearly defined revelation. Contrasting the theological naturalism of Meland to the more restrictive dualism of the tradition, Mueller states, "Such humanly drawn lines restrict God's presence in life, as if God is only present inside the Church. In the context of God's creation as good, Meland's holistic approach searches for God's presence wherever God wishes to manifest Himself" (p. 135). Appreciative awareness is fully open to the cultural, scientific, and finite manifestations of the divine. The traditional concept of revelation derives whatever meaning it may still have from a broadened concept of experience.

The essays in this volume successfully point to the continuing relevance of the classical American tradition. The theology that will continue to emerge from this origin will leave a lasting mark on Christian thought. In particular, the authors show how our tradition has overcome the God/world dualism of the past. This makes it possible to redefine the relation between the divine and human culture and to develop a richer theory and experience of the sacramental dimension of life. The conceptual boldness of the tradition empowers theology to transcend the limited horizons of the past and to prepare the way for what might be called a true post-Christian theology. If this indigenous North American theology can transform religious categories to serve extra-Christian interests as well, then it will play an important role in the future.

However, some reservations must be expressed. There are three areas in which the theology expressed in this volume might be found wanting. The first involves what I perceive to be an overemphasis on the aesthetic dimension of experience. While several of the authors have attempted to broaden and deepen their understanding of the aesthetic, it is not clear that such a reconstruction is itself sufficient. Missing in the aesthetic and appreciative account of experience is any sense of judgment and critique. God must be more than the *summum bonum* as envisioned by Peirce. Without a sense of the divine negation of the finite, theology remains one-sided.

The second problem is related to the first and involves the lack of any sense of the demonic. If the power of the demonic is reduced to the aesthetic concept of disharmony, then it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the overpowering forces of history and psychopathology. Clearly, the classical American tradition remains far too optimistic and melioristic in its understanding of the possibilities of growth. If North American theology is to become compelling outside of our cultural context, then it must become open to the shock of the demonic and let such awareness transform its conceptual structures.

Finally, the process theology coming out of Whitehead and, in a different way, Peirce, Royce and Meland, needs to become more open to the radicalness of the future. The progressivist myths of the American tradition are no longer compelling. In addition to creative advance and the "unity of adventure" with God is the deeper sense of the sheer otherness of the Kingdom of Justice. In spite of his rich innovations, Royce was unable to separate his understanding of this Kingdom from his evolutionary optimism. In addition to adventure and creativity is the power of hope that cannot be reduced to a Peircean would-be in the infinite long run. The theologies expressed in this rich and evocative volume would become even more compelling if they confronted the roots of the aesthetic, the demonic, and the radical futurity of the Kingdom. Yet even with these limitations, these essays open out a new realm for theological and philosophic exploration.

