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Robert P. Meye

Richard A. Muller

D. Lyle Dabney

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THEOLOGY, NEWS AND NOTES



Nature and Grace

FULLER
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

OCTOBER 1994

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Introduction

BY ROBERT P. MEYE

Months ago, six distinguished Christian theologians contracted to work with me on this issue of *Theology, News and Notes*. They received from me this word regarding their mission:

To be explored: The way of God in the created order. On discerning the way of God in the world of humankind, neither missing the general presence of God in the world, nor the particularity of that presence in the sphere of faith.

They received no further mandate—except in the case of Richard Muller, who was asked to contribute a “programmatically essay.” On the other hand, each of the contributors was signed on precisely because of the kind of expertise he or she brought to the task. (Incidentally, it turns out that—in respect to the theological issue of nature and grace—there is “another hand.” Our contributors do a masterful job of disclosing that other hand.)

For some time I have personally been persuaded of the importance of the issue (that is, nature and grace) in hand. A whole series of experiences have led me in this direction:

- growing up on a farm as a child of devout parents close to nature
- classes and seminars at Basel University, in Switzerland, with the great Karl Barth (*grace!*)—with his theological adversary (and friend) Emil Brunner close at hand in Zurich
- my explorations in New Testament spirituality—especially over the last two decades—and my alarm at the turn that “spirituality” (both the term and the practice of) seems to be taking, precisely, in Christian circles
- several bouts with cancer—and my close-up observation of the healing process
- and, not least, my lifelong hobby as a gardener, in which garden I see the hand of God working in ways that illuminate our common life in the Spirit.

Yes, I am attracted to the theme, the problematic *nature and grace*.

And I delighted in how six colleagues have proven to be such wise guides for us in this matter. Even if you may not agree with all they say, you will have to agree with me that each of them provides good grist for the theological mill. Together, they enrich our perspective on and our engagement in Christian life and theology.

Nature and grace. What God has joined together, let no one divide asunder! ■



ROBERT P. MEYE, Ph.D., is dean emeritus and professor emeritus of New Testament interpretation in the School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary.

Nature and Grace: Historical Resources for Contemporary Discussion

BY RICHARD A. MULLER

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*
—Isaac Watts, 1707

Christian piety as well as Christian theology demand that a distinction be made between nature and grace—between the “whole realm . . . that were a present far too small” and the “love so amazing, so divine” of Christ on the cross that “demands my soul, my life, my all.” What has been less frequently acknowledged in much twentieth-century theology is that Christian piety and Christian theology have, traditionally, also demanded that a high measure of respect be given to the realm of nature, including that part of the natural realm known as “human nature.” It is true, of course, that throughout the history of the church there have been theologies that so strongly affirmed the goodness of nature—including human nature—that they have underestimated the problem of sin and the depth of the human predicament. Such theologies are typically called “Pelagian” or “semi-Pelagian.” They place the initial possibility of faith and meritorious acts in fallen human nature and are characterized by teachings concerning the cooperation of the human will, with divine grace in the very beginning of salvation. It is also true that Augustinian and Reformed reactions against these apparent exaltations of nature have so emphasized the priority of grace that the fundamental goodness

of the natural order has sometimes been obscured. And, in the polarized context of these great debates over the gift of salvation, the necessary distinction between nature and grace may sometimes give the appearance of a dichotomy or separation, indeed, of an unsuitable dualism be-

There must be a distinction between the divine nature and human nature—but the very being and destiny of humanity depends on their relationship.

tween the natural and the supernatural.

Some resolution of this dichotomy that nonetheless supports the distinction would seem to be called for. And, surely, the best place to begin is with the definition of terms. At one level, “nature” (the “natural”) indicates the world or order in which we live and of which we

are a part. Inasmuch as we are a part of this order, our own temporal identity and substance can also be called “nature”—our nature. Theologically, the term *human nature* refers both to the original goodness of our identity and substance as created by God and to the original sinfulness of our identity and substance as presently existent after the Fall. At another level, more broadly considered, *nature* can indicate the identity of any existent being—so that we can also speak of the *divine nature*.

These two meanings or two distinct levels of meaning belonging to the term *nature* are conjoined in our language about Christ, in whom two natures, the divine and the human, are conjoined. Indeed, it is in Christ, the image of invisible God, that the original harmony between the divine nature and created nature and, by extension, between human nature and God’s nature, that natural order is both revealed and finally restored. Not only must we not create a separation or dualism of nature and grace—in a more fundamental sense, we must not assume an ultimate antagonism between the divine nature and created nature.

Grace is understood in the Christian tradition as the redemptive power of God that renews and elevates nature, specifically human nature, out of its fallenness and restores it to its proper relation to its creator. Even so, the problem of nature and grace is defined by the moral severance between the divine nature as it belongs to God and Christ and human nature as it belongs to us. The problem of nature and grace, therefore, reflects central issues belonging to the doctrines of God, Creation and providence, the Fall and sin, the person of Christ, the order of Redemption, and the last things. It is a problem intrinsic to nearly the whole of Christian theology, and it can be encountered in and through the meditations of

nearly all of the great theologians in the history of the church.

The Augustinian discussion of nature and grace—specifically, of the goodness of the created order and of the sovereign activity of redemptive grace—is so vast and spread over such a diversity of documents that only a most superficial introduction can be possible here. One avenue of access to Augustine's thought on this subject that is both historically fruitful and theologically significant is by way of his discussion of grace before the Fall, later identified by the Medieval doctors as the problem of the "superadded gift." In his discussion of the original state of human beings, Augustine was concerned to argue that the Fall was possible but not necessary: Adam and Eve were created mutable but capable of the good. The problem that Augustine encountered was simply that a being created with a good but mutable will would seem, almost necessarily, to mutate toward the less good. In order to resolve this problem, Augustine held that grace was given by God before the Fall, that it was sufficient to aid human beings in choosing the good, but that it was also resistible. In other words, far from being discontinuous with nature, grace belonged to the original condition of human beings as the divine favor on and divine support of their created goodness. Yet, even this initial, constitutive grace presumes the existence of our nature and serves to support its life in relation to God.

Augustine's sense of the depth of sin and the extent of the effects of corruption, however, can give the impression of a certain discontinuity and separation between nature and grace after the Fall. The utter inability of sinful humanity to approach God and the apparent overruling of the sinful will by the grace of predestination seem at times to drive a wedge between the natural order of now-sinful

humanity and the order of redemption. Nevertheless, it is clear that such a separation of nature and grace was not Augustine's fundamental intention. His examination of the human being as a restless creature, striving for repose in the good, is evident in the first paragraph of his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." The natural striving of human beings, incapable of reaching

The essential goodness of the created order and of the faculty of human reason are not set aside by grace and revelation but rather regenerated, reformed, and elevated.

their goal because of sin, is brought to completion by the grace of redemption. In addition, Augustine did not view redemptive grace as coercive. Rather, he held that grace so reforms the sinful will that it turns of its own accord toward God: Grace must be prior to any willing of the good, but the will is neither forced toward the good nor inactive in attaining the good. Again, grace presupposes the existence of the nature that it restores.

Thomas Aquinas followed out the Augustinian line of argument, but brought to it both

an element of systematization and an Aristotelian philosophical component. If we detect in Augustine's thought a tendency to separate nature and grace alongside the fundamental sense of the goodness of the created order, examination of Aquinas' thought evidences a more consistent emphasis on the continuity between nature and grace. Thus, Aquinas assumes not only that the being and goodness of the creation reflects the being and goodness of God, but that creation exists—and exists as good by participation in the divine goodness and being. This is not to say that the creation can be identified as a part of God, but that whatever being and goodness belongs to the creation is rooted in God and, indeed, conveyed by God to his creatures as the ground for their own existence.

This concept of participation provides the background for Aquinas' much-cited and often misunderstood statements that nature must be completed by supernature and that grace does not abolish but elevates nature. The point is not that grace opposes nature, but that the divine power for the good and the gracious divine favor on the created order are both the source of the order's existence and its ultimate goal. There must be a distinction between the divine nature and human nature—but the very being and destiny of humanity depends on their relationship. If sin manifests the distinction between the divine and human nature, grace guarantees us that there will be no ultimate separation.

Aquinas' sense of the distinction but also the continuity between nature and grace is reflected also in his view of the relationship of reason and faith and of the ability of human reason to learn of God through nature. On the one hand, Aquinas believed that sin limited and impaired our ability to understand God, whether by

reason or through examination of nature. Nonetheless, sin cannot be more than a defect in and a corruption of the created order. The essential goodness of the created order and of the faculty of human reason are not set aside by grace and revelation but rather regenerated, reformed, and elevated. Of the mysteries of the faith, Aquinas could argue that they are beyond reason but not unreasonable. Here, too, in the order of knowing, nature and grace are distinct but not separate. The truth of God transcends without violating the God-given forms of knowing that belong to our nature. God's revelation does not destroy or negate our knowledge of world and self. Rather, it restores, enlivens, elevates, and perfects our knowledge of self and world with a true and full knowledge of God.

John Calvin also should be understood as following out the basic Augustinian pattern—but with a greater sense of the noetic impact of sin than either Augustine or Aquinas and considerably less allowance for the positive power of human reason than we have seen in Aquinas. Calvin can reduce the possibility of a generalized natural theology to the negative function of leaving sinful humanity without excuse. Fallen humanity ought to find a knowledge of God and God's law in the created order but fails to do so because of sin. In Calvin's view, the natural revelation of God cannot be of any use to the unregenerate. Nevertheless, this natural revelation is a source of joy and a ground of constant praise in the regenerate. They see the goodness of God and of the divine order revealed in the things of the world. And, as Calvin points out at the very beginning of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, knowledge of self and knowledge of God—knowledge of what is natural and directly known and knowledge of what is supernatural and must be revealed—are interde-

pendent. There can be, he insists, no sound knowledge of self apart from knowledge of God. In a sense, for Calvin, as for Aquinas, graciously given knowledge of the things of God elevates and perfects our knowledge of the things of our world, including our knowledge of ourselves.

Even so, Calvin's view of the relationship between nature and

Grace is the divine favor bestowed on fallen creatures for the sake of drawing them back into communion with God.

grace presumes the priority of the natural and emphasizes the curative or restorative character of grace. It is, therefore, grace that not only redeems human beings from sin but also, as part of that redemptive work, opens the spiritually blinded eyes of the sinner to the wonders of God's revelation in the world order. As is clear from Calvin's reading of such biblical passages as Genesis 1-3, Psalms 19, 104, and 148, the creation, both in its original fashioning and in its present order, points toward the glory of God. Indeed, the contingent and precarious character of the order on which we depend for life itself points to the over-arching providential care of God. As one recent essay on Calvin's view of nature points out, Calvin was profoundly concerned to argue the primacy of God's work in ordering and sustaining the

world as the "theater" of his activity. The divine order, restraining and ultimately overruling the forces of chaos and sin, expresses itself both in general and in special providence and creates in the midst of our disaster the possibility of salvation. Salvation and the grace of salvation are neither (a) alien works of God that deny the world order by standing prior to it and disregarding its original created goodness, nor (b) strange and incongruous divine acts that set aside the work of creation in order to make way for something else. Rather, (c) they are restorative works of God that presume the value in God's sight of nature and its divinely given order.

The twentieth-century tendency, inspired by Barth, to argue a priority of grace over nature (and of gospel over law), therefore stands in contrast to the great tradition of the church, which—however it has construed the relationship between nature and grace—has consistently assumed that grace is restorative. One is tempted to hypothesize that Calvin would have reacted to the notion of grace before nature much as he reacted to Andreas Osiander's theory of an incarnation apart from sin—which is to say, as an unacceptable speculation beyond the content of revelation. We know from revelation that Incarnation is a focal point of the divine response to sin, not that it would have taken place for cosmological reasons. Similarly, we know from God's revelation that grace is the divine favor bestowed on fallen creatures for the sake of drawing them back into communion with God, not that it is the foundation on which the natural order rests.

Of course, the entire tradition wrestled with the question of the necessity of the created order and, typically, resolved the question with the assumption that God created freely—inasmuch as God has no need of the world for his own existence.

Undeniably, then, the creation can be understood as a gracious or unmerited act of God. Even so, once the world was created, God chose not to be a "god in a watchtower," a god of the Deists who wound up the cosmic watch and then left the world to its own devices. Again, there is a gracious or unmerited character to the work of divine providence. All of God's relationships with creation are acts of condescension and accommodation. All this the tradition has assumed. Where the line has been drawn, however, is in the strict definition of grace: Grace restrains evil, redeems, and restores human nature.

In an attempt to draw attention toward grace and salvation, we must never draw attention away from the natural order as the fundamental datum of the divine work. To do so would be to lose sight of the breadth of God's gift of being and to misunderstand the character of human existence, of the providential order that surrounds us, of our place in the world as stewards of God's handiwork, and of the work of redemption itself. There is a fundamental theology of creation and of divine order that frames and defines the terms of our lives, the covenanting activity of God, and the final redemptive fellowship of human beings with God. As Augustine well said, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

As Isaac Watts wrote, from a somewhat different but quite compatible perspective, "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." The statement is possible

because, as Aquinas put it, grace does not abolish nature, but elevates and perfects it. *Nature* is not, after all, some third thing, set apart from God and from human beings. It is God's order, having no ultimate value, indeed, no existence apart from God—and it is an order to which we, as creatures, do belong. And we, too, have no ultimate value, no existence at all apart from God. But this is hardly to deny value to us or to our world. Our nature and all of nature that exists around us is a treasure made by God and, despite all of

The natural order—and, in the very center of it, the human soul—is the precondition, the place of operation, and the object of God's grace.

its present imperfections and its present lowly state, a treasure destined for elevation to and perfection in the presence of God. Or, as Calvin indicated in his view of natural revelation and natural theology, the natural order, which so beautifully reveals the glory of God, is of no use to us in our fallen state apart from the love and grace of God. Nonetheless, the natural order—and, in the very center of it, the human soul that is elevated from its fallen condition by the grace of God—is the precondition, the

place of operation, and the object of God's grace.

The tradition—whether represented by Augustine, or Aquinas, or Calvin—neither debases grace by an excessive valuation of nature in and for itself, nor debases nature by failing to recognize in it the presupposition for God's gracious activity. There is redemption precisely because God values and loves his creation. And there is grace because the creation, as focused on the creature made in God's image, has fallen away from its original goodness toward an ungodly disorder. Neither Augustine nor Aquinas nor Calvin presents us with a nature-grace dualism. They do, however, present us—as does Scripture itself—with a necessary distinction between nature and grace and with a necessary priority of nature, inasmuch as our finite and troubled creation is both the immediate reason for and the theater of God's redemptive grace.

ENDNOTE

¹ Susan E. Schreiner. *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Labyrinth Press, 1991).

RICHARD A. MULLER, Ph.D., former professor of historical theology at Fuller Seminary, is now the P.J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Among his theological works are *Post-Reformation Dogmatics* (2 volumes) and *God, Creation and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius*.



The Nature of the Spirit of Grace: Human Spirituality and the Spirit of God

BY D. LYLE DABNEY

A concern for spirituality is alive and well in America, some 30 years after the much-publicized declaration that God is dead. In our popular culture, well- and not-so-well-known celebrities are only too anxious to appear on television and radio to discuss the new "spiritual" direction their lives have taken, while the shelves of bookstores in the local mall are crowded with accounts of roads less traveled and journeys to the light. In the church, too, spirituality has moved from the back to the front of the bus. Long confined in large degree to conservative or pietistic elements of the church, in recent years the subject has come to be embraced not just by the mainstream, but also by those who had always been perceived to be rooted in a decidedly more "materialist" ethos: feminist, liberation, and ecological theologians, Christian socialists, and a vast host of baby boomers and yuppies seeking something more than they have found thus far. The result: a boom in literature and seminars surveying the past, present, and future of Christian spirituality. In the nineties, spirituality is hot.

Though one might expect that this turn of events would meet with widespread enthusiasm (especially among Christians), that is, perhaps surprisingly, not the case. For the response of many both within and without the church has remained decidedly cool. Besides those *moderns* among us who dismiss all such talk as irrational and fuzzy-headed, there are those who see this turn to

spirituality in American pop culture in a more mundane, if no less jaundiced light. In an article titled "The New Spin Is Spirituality" which appeared a short time ago in *Publishers Weekly*,¹ Bob McCullough claims that American book publishers are now cynically clothing psychology and self-help books in the

There are two models that have dominated the theology of the West: "creation theology" and "Fall/Redemption theology."

language of *spirituality*—Christian and otherwise—in an attempt to overcome sagging sales.

In the church as well, there are also more than a few who find this whole movement—both those positions sporting explicit Christian colors and those which do not—to be deserving of suspicion. A typical example of much of this response is an article written by Michael Whelan titled "Counterfeit Elements in Christian Spirituality: A Challenge for Theological Educators" which was published earlier this year in the *Journal of*

Spiritual Formation.² Besides dismissing the work of M. Scott Peck as simply New Age ideas couched in Christian language and the spirituality of Carl Jung as treating religious concepts as though they were psychological realities and thus falling into blatant subjectivism, Whelan levels his cannon at Matthew Fox,³ a Catholic teacher of spirituality who has become very popular in recent years. In a statement that goes to the heart of much of the theological criticism of this movement on the part of those who find it troubling, Whelan argues that Fox makes the fatal error of pursuing what he (employing the categories used by Fox himself) calls "creation-centered" spirituality instead of "Fall/Redemption" spirituality. An analysis of this criticism will help us to get to the root of the concern of many who find the current turn to spirituality troubling. In addition, it will bring to light the underlying issue animating much talk of spirituality today.

As Whelan has correctly seen, there are two models that have dominated the theology of the West: "creation theology" and "Fall/Redemption theology." And the theological model one assumes does make a difference in how one deals with the question of spirituality. The first approach is seen most clearly in Medieval Scholasticism, a form of theology which makes creation—i.e., created nature—its starting point and understands salvation as an ascent to knowledge of God through the assistance of grace. This type of theology begins with a kind of syllogism: God is good in being and act; creation is an act of God; therefore, creation is essentially good. Now, that is by no means to be understood as denying the presence and pervasiveness of sin in the world, nor as implying that creation is somehow complete. Rather, according to this theology, despite the brokenness and

incompleteness in the world, it is ultimately the goodness of God's creating that defines the creation. That goodness expresses itself above all in an innate human capacity for God (the classical phrase is *homo capax Dei*), an openness or desire to ascend to the fulfillment of our nature in union with our creator.

Catholic theology of this sort is, therefore, cast as an appeal to the created nature of human beings to find the fulfillment of their being by ascending to God through a receiving of the grace Jesus Christ has provided in and through the church. The "natural" virtues, both moral and intellectual, it is claimed, lead to—even as they are transcended and guided to fulfillment by—the "theological" virtues of faith, hope, and love. Hence, while Catholic Scholasticism explicitly differentiates between nature and grace, it does not contrast but rather orders them in an unbroken hierarchical relationship.⁴ Its clear tendency, then, is to posit a fundamental continuum between nature and grace, the human and the Divine, creation and Redemption; for it is a theology of nature fulfilled by grace. Thus the representative affirmation of Medieval Scholasticism was: "Grace does not destroy, but rather presupposes and perfects nature."⁵

Over and against that sort of thought stands the theology of the Reformation, the second dominant model of theology in the West. The fundamental logic of Reformation theology is protest. Indeed, Reformation theology is *protesting* or *Protestant* theology. What Reformation theology protests against, above all, is the root affirmation of Scholastic theology: that human nature by virtue of being God's good creation possesses an innate *capax Dei* and is intrinsically open to and in search of God. "On the part of man, however, nothing precedes grace except ill will and even rebellion against grace," Luther declared

in his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* of 1517.⁶ Not the goodness but the sin and brokenness of the world is thus Reformation theology's point of departure; and that sin is seen as the defining reality in all of creaturely existence.

When Calvin spoke of the "depravity" of nature,⁷ he did not mean that there was no good in the world. What he meant was there was no *unalloyed* good in the world, no part or capacity or

Reformation theology is a theology . . . not of continuum but of contradiction; not a theology of creation, but rather of Fall and Redemption.

desire untouched by the Fall (*homo non capax Dei*). Sin has spoiled all, according to this theology, and there is no untouched *humanum* or residual *imago* to which one can appeal as purely good, as open to and in search of its creator. Indeed, according to this theology, the claim that there is such a possibility, such a *capax Dei*, is the essence of sin itself, for it constitutes the claim that one can by one's own efforts be redeemed.

Reformation theology, therefore, is cast not in the form of an appeal to the good, but in the form of a dialectic, according to which God in Jesus Christ as the divine Word stands over and against creation, *extra nos*,

confronting human beings in their sin and shame and summoning them to faith in the free grace of God made manifest in the death of Christ on the cross *pro nobis*. We come to the right relationship with God, it is claimed, not through being enabled by grace to fulfill nature's law and so ascend to God, but rather by forswearing such reliance on law and placing our trust in Christ who by grace imputes his righteousness to us.

This sort of theology, therefore, finds its point of departure not in creaturely good, but in creaturely sin, and takes the form not of creation's ascent to its God and Father, but of God's descent to creation in Jesus Christ the Son. Its clear tendency, then, is to assert contradiction between law and gospel, God and world, creation and Redemption. Not creation *and* anything, most certainly not nature *and* grace, but rather "grace alone" (*sola gratia*). And thus "Christ alone" (*solus Christus*), "faith alone" (*sola fide*), and "Scripture alone" (*sola Scriptura*) were the Reformation watchwords. Indeed, the one "and" the Reformers allowed, (law *and* gospel), simply underlines that point, for the *and* in this instance marks a relation, not of continuum, but rather of discontinuity; for this is a theology of law *contradicted* by gospel. Reformation theology is a theology, therefore, not of continuum but of contradiction; not a theology of creation, but rather of Fall and Redemption.

This brief survey of these two models of theology accomplishes two things. First, it clarifies Whelan's criticism of Matthew Fox's theology as constituting a spirituality of creation rather than of Fall/Redemption. Fox's understanding of spirituality does indeed trade on the notion that there is an innate human capacity for God which belongs to the very nature of the human as God's creature. This he shares with many of those who are currently championing a turn to spirituality. In doing so, many of

these accounts implicitly (as is so often the case) or explicitly (as in Fox's case) reject the notion that what defines the relation between the creature and the Creator is the Fall—that is, sin and alienation. Rather, according to these claims, human beings are open to and in search of God, and fully capable of turning to and attaining a relationship of intimacy with, worship of, and obedience to a God who stands ever waiting and available. We simply need to be taught how to open ourselves to God, they say. Thus, the title of a recent article by Frederic Brussat: "27 Ways to Live a Spiritual Life Everyday."⁸ Spirituality, in this view, becomes therefore just another form of self-help, a 12- (or, 27-) step program of ascent to the realization of human potential in relationship with the God and Creator of the universe. Anyone committed to a Reformation understanding of the depth of human sin and of the divide that thus exists between Creator and creature as well as to the sole sufficiency of the redemption wrought in Jesus Christ has to find such an account problematic, to say the least. Recognizing that, the current protests against much that passes for spirituality on the current scene become more understandable.

But the survey of the two theological models regnant in the West should also bring us to recognize something else as well, and that is the inadequacy of Whelan's criticism of Fox itself. For Whelan asserts that whereas Fox's version of spirituality is improper because it is *creation spirituality*, there is, nevertheless, a form that is proper, namely, *Fall/Redemption spirituality*, which he himself champions—a spirituality which limits the presence and activity of God in the world to the church. It is at that point, I would suggest, Whelan must be challenged, because his response fails to take the measure of the true challenge that the current turn to spirituality within and without the

church represents. For one of the motivating forces driving the move to spirituality today, I think, is the effort to get beyond a form of theology which can only speak of contradiction between God and world and thus God's absence from that which God created.

This movement, it seems to me, is but one example of a widespread—if still nebulous—intuition that while the theological model of Fall/Redemption succeeds in bringing to powerful

Christian spirituality speaks not of the nature of the human life of the spirit to achieve grace, but of the nature of the Spirit of grace to impart new and transformed life.

expression the depth of human sin and the utter inability of the creature to ascend to the Creator and thus humanity's complete dependence upon God's grace, it fails to do justice to the fact that the God who redeems is one and the same with the God who creates, and that the alienation between Creator and creature due to sin does not mean God's absence from nor indifference to the world. While it is certainly correct to criticize Fox and all others who interpret human spirituality as having a "natural" capacity for God—as an open door leading to the Creator—it is

just as certain that it is only marginally better to offer no alternative but the denial of God's presence in the world at large and the restriction of that presence to the church. But that is exactly what Whelan's talk of Fall/Redemption spirituality amounts to: yet another instance of the assertion of a theology of contradiction in the face of a theology of continuum. Thus, while this response, it seems to me, is right as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. For it fails to come to grips with the underlying issue: the question of God's presence and activity in all creation and not just the church.

Spirituality is hot in the nineties—and not just as a fad following the gross materialism of the eighties. It seeks to bring to expression, rather, an emerging intuition that the gospel of grace does not simply proclaim a God who in Jesus Christ stands over and against creation in contradiction. It is, I would suggest, one way in which many in the church today are searching for an understanding of God and God's gospel of Redemption as including and not excluding creation; a search which has not yet set forth a theology commensurate to its concerns. As such, the current turn to spirituality in church and culture represents a challenge to move beyond the either/or of a theology of continuum or of contradiction and forge a theology which refuses to play off nature against grace or grace against nature, creation against Redemption or Redemption against creation. Such a theology would rather seek a perspective from which both creation and Redemption, both nature and grace, would be encompassed in a unified vision of God's mercy through Jesus Christ.

The perspective from which that might be accomplished, I would suggest, could be found in a proper theology of the Holy Spirit. For it belongs not to the nature of the creature, but to the

nature of the "Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29) to relate creation to the Creator. The spirituality the church must seek to bring to expression at this point in time is, therefore, not another claim for the nature of the creature, but rather the proclamation of the grace of the Creator who has been faithful to creation even in its sin and death. Even "east of Eden," God is present in and with creation as the source of its every breath and the hope of its every aspiration. That God, who as Spirit is the source of all life, becomes then the re-source of all life in and through Jesus Christ, the one who from all eternity is defined by God's Spirit, of whom all four Gospels proclaim: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8).

Christian spirituality becomes, then, not the account of the natural *spiritual* capacity of all creatures to ascend to their creator and thus fulfill their existence, nor the account of the act of God gracing the few with the Spirit of Christ who contradicts the sin of nature. It is rather the account of the God of all creation, graciously present among God's creatures giving life and hope and help—even in the midst of their sin and shame—who then acts in a further work of gracious love to impart, through the Son, the Spirit of life to those who know only death and thus to raise the creature to new and *transformed* existence. For Christian spirituality speaks
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D. LYLE DABNEY, Dr.Theol., a Fuller alumnus (M.A., 1981), is assistant professor of theology in the Department of Theology at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Spirituality of the Indian Road

BY PAUL G. HIEBERT

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2-4. NRSV).

Not our ordinary Sunday morning text. At least not for us in the West where Christianity is the dominant religion and where the church has drunk deeply from the Enlightenment fountain of progress and the "health and prosperity gospel." But these words express the living experience of the majority of young churches around the world who live as minorities in Hindu, Muslim, or Buddhist societies. What can we in the West learn from them about living vital Christian lives in cultures increasingly hostile to Christianity?

This was the question that faced the first-generation converts in Pedda Danvada, a village in South India. Two decades ago evangelists and missionaries visited the "untouchable" community and invited the people to follow a new God—Jesus, who offered them salvation and dignity, even though they were despised by the people around them. Whole extended families responded until most of the untouchables in the village were Christians.

The new Christians gathered for fellowship, to worship, and to encourage one another in faith. They gave up liquor and sent their children to school. They worked hard and improved their living conditions. When the village festivals came, however,

they refused to beat the large leather drums at the head of the Hindu parades, which was their hereditary caste right and responsibility. The village elders cursed them and threatened to punish them if they did not carry out their traditional tasks in the temple. They responded that they were now Christians and could not take part in the Hindu ceremonies, nor would they continue the defiling customs that marked them as *untouchables*.

The village leaders sent troublemakers who beat them and trashed their homes. When the Christians still refused to obey the high-caste leaders, the leaders sent the Christians an order forbidding them to draw water from the village well a half-mile outside of town. Denied the right to draw water at the village well, the Christian women were forced to walk an additional half-mile to the closest stream for their water.

The Christians bore the persecution without appealing to the police for help. They knew they would find little relief there. They held special prayer meetings for God's guidance and decided to dig a well for themselves. They raised money through offerings and received a small government grant. They dug in one of their fields near the village, but at 20 feet they struck granite. They tried another place, and again they struck rock. Finally, after a special time of prayer, they decided to dig on the property next to their church. Again they struck rock. Realizing they could not continue to dig more dry wells, they decided to blast through the rock at this

present site until they ran out of money. After 10 feet of granite, they hit shale, and at 30 feet, abundant water!

The Christians held a special service to thank God for his miraculous provision. Others had dug wells in the village in the past, but all had failed to strike water. The Hindus, too, saw this success as the power of the Christians' God.

Now the Christians gathered to decide what to do with their plentiful supply of water. After prayer and extended discussion, they sent a delegation to the high-caste community and invited all of the people to draw from their well in the village. Another miracle had taken place, as these once-despised people invited their oppressors to draw water from their well.

What can we, as Western Christians, who count our Christian heritage by generations, learn about spirituality from new believers such as these, who are still amazed at the radical message of the gospel?

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

We children of the Enlightenment believe that we are basically good, and that we deserve health, prosperity, and a long life. When misfortunes strike, we blame God for allowing these things to happen to us. We also believe in progress and find it hard to believe that our spiritual ancestors, or our brothers and sisters in other lands, could be more spiritual than we are, or teach us anything significant.

But we are the exceptions. For most Christian people throughout history, life has not been comfortable or easy or joyful. They have had moments of joy, but their everyday lives have been full of hardships. The Christians in Pedda Danvada recognize this. They do not blame God when they are sick, or their child dies, or their crops fail. They realize that these problems, and much more, are

what we truly deserve as sinners—that God owes us nothing. Rather, they give thanks to God for the blessings he freely gives—another day's breath, food for today's table, the joy of a family reunion, the unexpected healing of a child. In the midst of great hardships, they are unceasingly grateful for the mercies of God, while we, with so much, often complain because we want more. We need to learn to live lives of

Love, joy, peace, patience, holiness, and the other fruit of the Spirit are lived out . . . in the tangles of everyday life.

thankfulness for the many blessings that come unexpectedly and undeservedly in life.

But the tribulations of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world go beyond those common to all humans. These often include persecution for their Christian faith. They know from experience that faith is costly. We in the West need to learn again that true Christian living will bring persecution and that this is a powerful witness to the gospel. We need to learn the joy in suffering for Christ's sake.

THE POWER OF SIMPLE FAITH

Another lesson we can learn from Christians around the world is the vitality and power of simple faith. By this I do not mean a faith that is simplistic, childish, or immature. Rather, I refer to the faith of new believers before it is clouded by over-analysis and trite familiarity. It is

a willingness to follow Christ in the immediate experiences of everyday life.

We children of the Enlightenment live in a two-tier world. We turn to God to take care of spiritual and eternal matters, but rely on our own knowledge based on natural causation to deal with the problems of life on earth. In such a world, we can experience God only in those rare moments when he breaks through the barrier between these tiers and shows himself to us in extraordinary ways. We seek him through inner mystical experiences that transcend our prosaic lives. We look for him in experiences of ecstasy. We see his hand in miracles that confound the laws of science. But when these experiences become commonplace, we must seek new, more dramatic encounters to satisfy our craving for an awareness of God. Rarely do we see God, however, where he is mostly at hand—in nature, people, and the everyday events of life—because we think we can explain these in naturalistic terms.

Indian village Christians do not make a distinction between the supernatural and natural realms, between divine *intervention* and natural *law*. They sense God's presence in everyday life. The believers in Pedda Danvada
—Please turn to page 23.

PAUL G. HIEBERT, Ph.D., formerly professor of anthropology and South Asian Studies and director of doctoral programs in Fuller's School of World Mission, now chairs the Department of Mission and Evangelism, serves as professor of mission and anthropology, and is director of the Ph.D. Program in Intercultural Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.



"It Is Like Yeast": How the Gospel Should Relate to Culture

BY MIROSLAV VOLF

Today we are flooded with literature on gospel and culture, and the torrents are rushing at us from all corners of the world. Christians of every age have grappled seriously with the question, because it touches the very heart of the Christian faith. H. Richard Niebuhr's classic historical and theological study, *Christ and Culture*, bears ample testimony to this fact. What has changed, however, is the sheer amount and intensity of attention given to the question today. Our forebears were engaged with it. We seem obsessed by it.

It would be a mistake to treat our obsession with the theme of gospel and culture as some inexplicable disease. There is nothing sick or mysterious about it. The reasons we cannot take our hands off the topic are well-known and need no more than a brief mention here. One is the belief that cultures are human artifacts which, at the same time, profoundly shape who human beings are. The other is the awareness of the rich multiplicity (and therefore, relativity, some would add) of cultures across our shrinking globe. Yet another is the observation that, as of recently, cultures are changing at a breathtaking speed—some disappearing completely, others experiencing profound transformations, and some splintering into many subcultures. All this, and much more, makes us uncertain about how gospel relates to culture—to what extent the gospel itself is a cultural artifact. How much should we let

it change the cultures it encounters or be shaped by that encounter? How can the one gospel be adequately expressed in many cultures? How it can be made plausible, given the pace of cultural change? Since we are

The notion of Christian presence as an internal difference has a number of radical implications for mission and theology.

uncertain about these issues, we try to feel our way around the topic—often surrounded by thick darkness.

Instead of taking readers up different avenues in order to show either that they are dead-end streets (such as the ones Niebuhr titled "Christ against culture" and "Christ of culture") or that they take us where we want to be, but are full of dangerous potholes such as the one Niebuhr called "Christ, the transformer of culture"), I will

simply suggest the road I think we should take.

METAPHORIZING THE DOMINANT ORDER

In dealing with the theme of gospel and culture, I find some aspects of Michel de Certeau's thought helpful. Reflecting on the uses people make of cultural goods that are produced for them, he writes:

Users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules.¹

De Certeau explains this creativity of the users by looking at that painful process which began October 12, 1492, when Columbus' Spanish ships sailed to the shores of Latin America—to colonize the indigenous "Indian" population. We sometimes fail to see that, despite their oppression and powerlessness, the indigenous people were not simply passive recipients of an imposed culture. He continues:

The Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within—not by rejecting them or by transforming them (though that occurred as well), but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape. They metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register. They remained *other* within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally.

They diverted without leaving. Procedures of consumption maintained their difference in the very space that the occupier was organizing (p. 32).

Forget for a moment that the Spaniards were Christians and the Indians were not. I want to take the *behavior* of the Indians in relation to the colonizing power as a model for the way the Christian church should relate to culture. To make the comparison work, however, one needs to keep in mind two ways in which the image of conquest and colonization—the behavior of the Spaniards—is not adequate to describe the relation between cultures and the gospel. For one, it inverts the direction of the process: Cultures do not colonize Christian churches, but churches spring up within existing cultures. They can be more or less distant from the culture, but they certainly do not first exist outside of culture so as to be colonized by it.

Second, culture is not simply a negative power against which one has to fight, but a space in which one lives, the air one breathes. Theologically speaking, cultures are not simply domains of the Prince of Darkness, but also fruits of the life-giving power of the Creator God. Apart from such inadequacies, however, the image of metaphorizing the culture—subverting it from within—is helpful. It rightly suggests that Christians should neither abandon nor dominate their cultural environments. Rather, we should live differently *in* them, and that difference should be *internal*, not simply to a given cultural space, but to cultural forms.

What does this mean concretely? What are some paradigmatic options open to Christians? First, it is possible for us, as Christians, simply to adopt some elements of the cultures in

which we live, putting them to different uses, guided by the values that stem from our being "in God." We live in the same kinds of houses, drive the same kinds of cars; we listen to the same music and enjoy some of the same visual or culinary arts. What we Christians do differently is put our houses, cars, or various arts to partly different uses than our non-Christian

We need to retrieve the stress on difference. It is the difference that matters.

neighbors. A house can be a vehicle of service, a meal, or an occasion of worship.

Sometimes putting things to different uses requires changes in the things themselves. To be a good vehicle of service, a house might need a guest room and larger living room. To take a different example: A work-space or a machine might foster more humane kinds of work if constructed in a certain way.

Which brings us to the second possible way of living the Christian difference within a given culture: The majority of the elements of a culture may be adapted, but they will be transformed from the inside. For instance, one might use the same words as the general culture does, but their semantic fields will be occupied by new content that partly changes and partly replaces the old.

Consider a basic term in our Christian vocabulary such as "God." It is a term that Christians did not invent. We inherited it from the Hebrew people of

God, and these, in turn, from their environment. Yet just as for Jews, the term *God* came to mean the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and Miriam. So also for Christians, the semantic field of the term *God* has been partly changed to mean "the God of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ." A host of other Christian terms reveal similar inner transformation.

The same is true of Christian practices. As Christians, we take part in particular culturally defined practices, but shape them on the basis of our dominant values. Take marriage, for example. Many of its elements are the same for Christians as they are for anyone else. Yet for Christians, the love between partners in marriage is shaped by the sacrificial love of Christ for the Church.

Third, there may be some elements of a given culture that Christians have to discard and possibly replace by other elements. Take slavery. It simply had to be discarded, since in Christ there is "no longer slave or free," but "we all are children of God through faith" (Galatians 3:26-28). The runaway slave Onesimus was to be received by Philemon as "a beloved brother," and not only "in the Lord" but also "in flesh" (Philemon 16). The gospel required an inner transformation of this cultural institution of such magnitude that it eventually amounted to discarding the institution itself.

Taking these three complementary ways of relating to culture together, we can say that *the Christian difference* is always a complex and flexible network of small and large refusals, divergences, subversions, rejections, and more or less radical alternative proposals, surrounded by the acceptance, affirmation, and laudation of many cultural givens. There is no single correct

way to relate to a given culture as a whole, or even to its dominant thrust. There are only numerous ways of accepting, transforming, rejecting, or replacing various aspects of a given culture from within. This is what it means for Christian difference to be *internal* to a given culture.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The notion of Christian presence as an internal difference has a number of radical implications for mission and theology. I will name here only four:

■ Strictly speaking, as Christians, we have never had our own proper and exclusive cultural territory—our own proper language, our own proper values, our own proper rationality. To be more precise, our own proper territory has always already been inhabited by others. We speak the language we have learned from our neighbors, though we metaphorize its meaning from within. We have inherited the value structure of the culture at large, yet we change some of its elements, more or less radically, and refuse to accept others. We take up the rules of what makes sense in a given culture, and yet we subvert them and occasionally refuse to follow where they lead. We belong, and yet do not belong. We are present, and yet distant. To become *Christian* means to divert without leaving. To live as a Christian means to keep inserting a difference into a given culture without ever stepping outside to do so.

■ For the Christian difference to be *internal* to a given culture means that Christians have no place from which to transform the *whole* culture we inhabit—no place from which to undertake that eminently modern project of restructuring the whole social and intellectual

life, no virgin soil on which to start building a new, radically different city. No revolutions are possible. All transformations are piecemeal—transformations of some elements, at some points, for some time, with some gain and, possibly, some loss. These transformations are reconstructions of the structures which must be inhabited as the reconstruction is going on. As a result, what we Christians end up helping to build resembles much less a suburban development project—all planned out in advance in architectural bu-

The question, therefore, is not whether but how inculturation should take place.

reaus—than an ancient city with its “maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and all this, surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight, regular streets and uniform houses.” This is how Ludwig Wittgenstein described our language; and this is how we should think of the results of the insertion of the *Christian difference* into a given culture.

■ Accommodation should not be part of this Christian project. We are used to hearing that kind of message from old-style fundamentalists. And in this one thing they were right (though they often failed to live up to their own rhetoric of difference and accommodated in surprising ways). The children of fundamentalists no less than their older siblings, the liberals,

do not like to hear diatribes against accommodation. They like to be at the *center*, to be mainstream—theologically and culturally. They want influence—for the good of the church, of society, of the world. And so they accommodate. But the accommodation strategy has been a bad investment, and, given the nature of contemporary societies, its yield will diminish even more.

We need to retrieve the stress on *difference*. It is the *difference* that matters. Erase the difference and literally nothing will remain that *could* matter. Without boundaries, groups dissolve. Our task should not be accommodation, but distance from a given culture—a critical distance, to be sure, not a naive distance unaware of its own captivity to what it thinks it has escaped—a productive distance, not a sterile, self-insulating distance of those who let the rest of the world go to hell. Accommodation is a given. It takes place whether we want it or not. Difference is not a given. Rather, it is an arduous task that needs to be accomplished anew all the time. Difference, not accommodation, is the reason why theology needs to be fresh.

■ If accommodation is out, must not inculturation also be unacceptable? To answer this question, let us step back briefly to take a look at what happens at conversion. When we become Christians, the gospel disrupts the equilibrium of our cultural identity. When we receive it, we become estranged from our culture, because all cultures are estranged from God. If one feels uncomfortable with that disruption, one might as well feel uncomfortable about becoming a Christian. Without *disruption*, there can be no Christian faith.

It is essential, however, that this disruption remain *internal* to a given culture. That is the main thrust of this article. The question, therefore, is not *whether* but *how* inculturation should take

place. Theologians are good for many important things, but they have not proven so good for formulating the gospel in terms of the culture at large (except, perhaps, in terms of the limited intellectual culture of which they are a part). Inculturation is best done by the faithful people of God themselves. (*Western* theologians—or theologians trained in the West—are good for many things, but not for giving advice to non-Western believers on how they should go about inculturating the gospel.)² Inculturation takes place when people in their own contexts receive the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ and run with it—living out and expressing the Christian difference in their own terms and symbols and through their own practices. Theologians do have a role to play in the process of inculturation, but it is a critical one rather than a creative one. Here, their task is to lay bare the captivities of the church to the spirit of the age, of every church and in every culture. Which is to say that instead of *in*-culturing the gospel, theologians should think about whether they may need to *de*-culturate it—free it from contamination by those elements of culture which have been pervaded by the spirit of the age.

When the gospel comes into a culture, it always disrupts. But if it comes in an authentic way, in a way that honors both the creative and redemptive work of God, the disruption will remain *internal* to a given culture. Why? Because the people to whom the gospel comes will remain part of their culture; they will divert without leaving. And if they do this, inculturation will take care of itself. The real question is not how to inculturate the gospel.

The key issue is how to maintain the *Christian difference* from the culture of which we are a part and how to make that difference a leaven in the culture.

“To what should I compare the kingdom of God?” asked Jesus rhetorically. “It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (Luke 13:20-21).

To erase the difference is to undo the Creation. . . . Literally everything depends on difference.

THE DIFFERENCE AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT

To conclude, I have sung the praises of difference, and some readers may have been disturbed. We fear that the ghosts of obscurantism and fundamentalism will be attracted, or that the demons which make things fall apart will rush in, and that the center will be unable to hold. But consider once again, now more generally, the importance of difference. Level the difference, and what we have left is *nothing*—we ourselves, along with everything else, will be drowned in the sea of undifferentiated “stuff” that is indistinguishable. To erase the difference is to undo the Creation, that intricate

pattern of separations that God established during those unique six days when the universe was formed out of *no-thing*. Literally *every-thing* depends on difference.

Now, apply this claim about Creation to the relation between gospel and culture. Here too, everything depends on difference. If we have difference, we can have the gospel. If we don't, we can't. We will either have just plain old culture, or eschatological new creation, but we will not have the gospel. The gospel is always about difference. After all, it means the *good news*, and it is proclaimed to the sick, not to the healthy, to sinners, not to the righteous (Mark 2:17). The trick is to know *what* the Christian difference is and where precisely it needs to surface and where it does not. The object is how to keep ourselves open to God's reign and, at the same time, remain internal to a given culture. As I see it, *this* is what the problem of the relation between gospel and culture is all about. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. xiv.

2. See Susan Billington Harper, “Ironies of Indigenization: Some Cultural Repercussions of Mission in South India” (Typescript, 1994).

MIROSLAV VOLF, Dr. Theol., Dr. Theol. habil, is associate professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Among Volf's recent writings is *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).



The Mystery of Preaching

BY MARGUERITE SHUSTER

One of the most persistent questions from beginning students in homiletics concerns the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching. Isn't there *more* to preaching than somehow learning to construct and present an enticing religious speech? And mightn't too much care lavished on the construction actually get in the way of that "more"? These are questions, obviously, of the relationship of nature and grace, and of how "our job" and "God's job" relate; and I suspect that as most ministries progress, they get more buried by the force of habitual practices than resolved by the wisdom of experience.

Perhaps the questions initially erupt—at least partly—from students' dismay at being faced with demands for careful attention to exegesis, the contemporary lives of the hearers, structural integrity, linguistic style, and effective delivery. To be expected to pay heed to all of these matters and more besides, not just for a few weeks of class but throughout a lifetime of weekly preparation, may seem simply overwhelming. There must be an easier way! But partly, no doubt, the questions rise from a deeper spring. How dare we even contemplate standing in front of people week after week in the name of God if we believe deep down that we have nothing more to offer than a mix of entertainment, religious sales, emotional catharsis, mental hygiene, moral uplift, tips for better living, and social reform or stabilization (as the current case may seem to require)? Every minister with a

deep sense of call knows that these things are simply not enough. So what must be done, and what must be left undone, if human words are truly to become God's word to a gathered congregation?

Surely this last question is wrongly put, and wrongly put questions reliably generate

God normally uses means, like preaching and preachers, to accomplish his ends.

unhelpful answers, such as: "Don't prepare. The Lord has promised to give us words when we need them." "Never bring notes into the pulpit or you will interfere with the Spirit's freedom." "Just preach the Bible and stay away from illustrations. Illustrations are only human words." "Forget all of this intellectual stuff and speak to people's hearts. God wants our hearts." And so on—falsehoods seasoned with just enough truth to make them seductive. Would that there were some such *rule* that would somehow mandate the Spirit's presence. But God remains free—free to give discipline to persevere in preparation, free to inspire in the study as well as in the pulpit, free to speak through a manuscript-reading preacher like Jonathan Edwards, free also to work through the rough-hewn rather than the polished, if he chooses.

Nothing of eternal significance will be accomplished unless the Lord works. But apart from seeking to be faithful to the Word that he has promised us will not return void (Isaiah 55:11), we cannot command God's activity. That is part of the mystery of preaching, which has everything to do with the mystery of grace. Before the mystery of grace we bow down and worship; we do not bring in Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple or a homiletics professor.

However, the very facts that homiletics and preaching practice form part of any normal seminary curriculum, and that parish pastors frequently seek out preaching workshops, suggest a widespread assumption that something about preaching can and should be learned. The job of a teacher of homiletics is to make at least the technical aspects of sermon design less mysterious. This goal implies that, in preaching as in many other domains, we do not construe nature and grace as being simply and necessarily opposed to one another. After all, if we take a Christian view of creation, we know nature not as something independent of God, but as itself given by grace. The same Paul whose own conversion was initiated apart from human means nonetheless later wrote of how hard he personally labored by and in response to God's grace (1 Cor. 15:10) and of the necessity of preaching if people are to call on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:14—taken up in Article VI of Fuller's Statement of Faith, which affirms that the Holy Spirit renews our hearts "through the proclamation of the gospel"). God normally uses means in accomplishing his ends. And the fact that Paul speaks of the work of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers as involving *gifts* (Eph. 4:11) implies that capacity for certain competencies

is critical to their work. It is not "unspiritual" to develop these competencies; rather, to fail to develop them is to flout the very grace that bestowed the gift.

The Fathers of the Church pressed home the same points. In the first treatise ever written on homiletics (*On Christian Doctrine*, 4.2.3), Augustine defended eloquence as a tool to be used in service of truth, commenting that we ought not to leave to the pleadings of pagans everything that makes discourse attractive. Chrysostom, as famous a preacher as ever lived, counted even great piety to be insufficient qualification for the priesthood, unless good abilities are also present (*On the Priesthood*, 3.15). Ability and skill—*nature* as given and developed—obviously bear importantly upon effectiveness in ministry.

But if the importance of nature is indeed so obvious, what is the problem? The same old problem, of course, which can hardly be stated without sounding trite: sin. The nature made good by the Creator is corrupted by the Fall and persistently asserts itself over against the Lord. But notice that it may do so not only by exalting its own powers and relying upon them excessively, but also—and this is the point that preachers who scorn homiletical discipline often miss—by masquerading as a pure channel of grace. It may, by refusing its proper responsibilities or by following some formula, suppose that by this refusal or that formula it can be confident that God will assuredly fill the gap; and it proceeds to present the tactic it chooses as *the* truly spiritual way to proceed.

Take a few standard problems, some of which are and will doubtless continue to be fiercely debated by homiletical theorists and by preachers themselves. Put

aside for the moment the issue of comparative effectiveness as judged by pragmatic criteria—which criteria may, in fact, lead to differing recommendations for persons of differing gifts and in differing situations (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Consider just the matters of nature and grace and of opportunities given to the old Adam or the old Eve to deceive and be deceived.

One example is the endless argument among those who use a manuscript, those who use an outline or notes, and those who

We must give nature its due, in both its gifts and its hazards. But . . . to give nature its due is also to recognize its limits.

go to the pulpit with nothing in hand at all (except perhaps their Bibles). The manuscript preacher may be accused of a lack of openness to the Spirit of God in the preaching moment; of a faithless unwillingness to rely upon the Lord; of an idolatry of the carefully crafted sermon that is really a manifestation of pride—even if it excuses itself on the grounds of paralyzing anxiety or of the need to heed time constraints and to address sensitive issues in a noninflammatory way. Plenty of room for sin here. Also plenty of room for grace to inform careful workmanship, bring insights into sharp focus, and guard the preacher from brash and hurtful offhand remarks. Besides, no law of the Medes and Persians ever

decreed that a preacher cannot deviate from a written page should he or she feel moved to do so.

The preacher who takes little or nothing to the pulpit, by contrast, can hardly be accused of slavish dependence upon a particular form of words (leaving aside the memorizer, who, many believe, will usually have the worst of both worlds). Not having anything before one on which to depend can indeed open one to a greater sensitivity to the Spirit and to the people to whom one is speaking. And no ordinance mandates that such a preacher may not prepare every bit as long and carefully as the manuscript preacher. But the question is, does he or she? Sloth may be lurking not far in the background. Furthermore, the presumption that the Lord will fill one's mouth when one has nothing to say—or that it is really the Lord who speaks if one just happens to have a gift of gab—holds considerable potential for both pride and irresponsibility. Let the preacher examine him- or herself, and let those who are without sin in these matters pass assured judgment.

Or take the issue of how one apportions one's energies between biblical exposition and interaction with contemporary life. "Sticking to the Bible" gives no guarantee of grace-filled utterance. The Bible may be expounded wrongly, or in a way that leads not to changed lives, but only to an accumulation of head-knowledge. Or, in the effort to change lives, a preacher may set forth "biblical principles" in Pelagian fashion, as if anyone with an ounce of willpower could straighten up and fly right, if only he or she would.

People may sense more of what feels to them like grace in a sympathetic analysis of their

human situation and human struggles, and in provision of a few helpful hints for hurting and being hurt a little less often. Yet this other route may, in fact, mask an ultimate despair. Shut up to the possibilities of fallen human nature, giving no beckoning vision of the new humanity in Christ, it leaves its devotee, in C. S. Lewis's phrase, "far too easily pleased."

On the one hand, preaching that fails to address the whole person's (and the whole world's) needs and questions, hopes and fears, fails to show due care for the very persons for whom Christ died. But on the other hand, preaching that fails to arouse new questions and new needs, new hopes and, yes, new fears, will inevitably sell the gospel short. Sometimes an insightful analysis of a text will open a whole new world. Sometimes a carefully wrought story will make a text suddenly luminous. Surely there is no single, ideal mix that guarantees grace and nature will both be taken seriously, but a variety of ways of being faithful—and at least as large a variety of ways of being unfaithful.

Or take the deliberate evoking of emotions, perhaps in the service of an altar call. No question that for most people, emotion is a significant component of their religious experience. Sometimes, to fail to react with any emotion is to have failed to understand: As someone remarked, a person who shows no feeling at the cry of "FIRE!" simply does not know the danger he or she is in. Preaching aimed only at the head comes across as cold and dry. Emotions may engage the will and gear one up for essential action. But emotionality is no more "spiritual" in its essence than is rationalism. I recall reading (source long forgotten, but point all too easily

remembered) of a young man who, in response to effective emotional manipulation by a powerful preacher, "went forward" to make a profession of faith. The next day, rather than finding himself on the way to being made new, he instead found himself feeling vaguely unclean, having violated his own integrity under the pressure of

Grace arms us against the dread of a final futility; it does not spare us present effort.

the moment. What the ordinary observer would have readily attributed to grace turned out, in fact, to have been due to nature.

Nature is important, and human nature is corrupted by sin. God normally uses means, like preaching and preachers, to accomplish his ends; and he has no pure means available to him. We use means in our preaching—techniques of preparation, filing systems, structural designs that take into account human patterns of thought and motivation, and so on—none of which dropped from heaven. So now what?

First, I think, we must simply affirm the importance of taking seriously what the Lord takes seriously: our gifts, our consequent responsibilities, and our sinfulness. We must seek to conduct ourselves as workers who do not need to be ashamed of the way we handle the sacred texts (2 Tim. 2:15). This is to say that we will expend care and effort and get whatever training that will enhance our skill and discernment. Furthermore, we

must seek in our preaching, as in every aspect of our ministries, to use means that are consistent with our ends—honorable means, not means that use observable effect as the *only* yardstick to measure merit. For we must continually remind ourselves that the Lord alone can judge the true results of our work. (Observe advertising techniques if you want evidence that "what works" may hardly appeal to the most godly sides of people, though that point is, of course, not an argument in favor of the spiritual superiority of ineffective efforts.) We must seek to be alert to our own pet temptations, whether to pride or to sloth, to faithlessness or to presumption, to rationalism or to emotionalism, to manipulateness or to culpable neglect, of what we can and should know about good communication. We must give nature its due, in both its gifts and its hazards.

But, second, to give nature its due is also to recognize its limits. The realities of finitude and sin mean that we will assuredly not be, at either the technical level or the moral level, the preachers we ought to be; and woe to us if worldly success obscures that truth. Certainly the church of the late fourth century was right in its theological judgment regarding the Donatist controversy, that sacraments administered by unworthy ministers are nonetheless valid. Surely the same principle applies to the gospel as preached by unworthy ministers. I had a student, of the fruitfulness and integrity of whose ministry I have not the slightest doubt, whose conversion came under the ministry of Jim Jones (of

Jonestown infamy). Most of us can testify to preaching some sermon after which we felt shame verging on despair, knowing that we simply had not done a good job. But later we heard that that not-very-ad-equate sermon made a life-changing difference to someone—while sermons that met our personal criteria of excellence produced, so far as we know, nothing at all. Grace, thank God, is bigger than nature.

Part of the mystery of grace, though—and perhaps part of the mystery of grace-filled preaching—is that we receive and feel it as *grace*, as something that engages that measure of freedom that pertains to us as creatures and makes genuine response possible. It is not a crass divine determinism, not a substitute for nature. The very good works that the Lord prepared beforehand, he prepared *that we should walk in them* (Eph. 2:10). Grace arms us against the dread of a final futility; it does not spare us present effort. So, as preachers and as Christians, we present our best to God and to God's people. We plant, we water, according to our gifts and circumstances; but only God can give the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). ■

MARGUERITE SHUSTER, Ph.D., associate professor of preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary, is the author of eight doctrinal sermons in Paul K. Jewett's *God, Creation, and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1991) and five doctrinal sermons in Paul K. Jewett's *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human*, a forthcoming work from Eerdmans that she edited and completed.



Culture-Protestantism and Confessing Christ

BY GABRIEL FACKRE

The questions concerning the relationship between nature and grace come in many sizes and shapes. We will explore them here in a culture/church framework. Leander Keck has made the case in *The Church Confident* that much of mainline Protestantism has succumbed to the narcissisms and utopianisms

What happens when the church's preachers and teachers take their signals from the "spirit of the age"?

of the day, abandoning its proper call to the uncalculating praise of God, theological substance, and nonideological public witness.¹ What happens when the church's preachers and teachers take their signals from the "spirit of the age"? Our laboratory for investigating these temptations is the United Church of Christ, an old-line Protestant denomination. The UCC, therefore, is a case study with exportable learnings.

As diagnoses are in abundance, we turn our attention here to cures: a study of the anatomy of a new movement within the UCC called "Confessing Christ." Its beginnings illustrate both the possibilities and problems of mainline

Protestant efforts to relate but not capitulate to the regnant culture.

The debt to the Confessing Church of Germany and the Barmen Declaration of 1934 is obvious in both the name and the concerns of the Confessing Christ movement. But there are differences. No charges of apostasy have been leveled, and no "come-outer" plans are in the offing. Confessing Christ is "centrist" in constituency and intent, viewing itself as a loyal opposition within its church.

HISTORY

The roots of the Confessing Christ movement can be traced to theological soul-searching among some UCC pastors and teachers in the late 1970s. The small biblical-theological-liturgical group was formed in 1979. They issued a "Call to Faithfulness" decrying "the techniques of management and manipulation . . . that have elbowed aside biblical preaching, sound theological teaching, living worship and sacrament." In 1984 this "Bible-theology-liturgical" group (the "BTL") joined with the newly formed Mercersburg Society—which followed the theological tradition of John Nevin and Philip Schaff—to convene a grassroots theological colloquy marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Barmen Declaration. Pastors and leaders who were committed to their church's well-known social-action agenda and concern for relevance acknowledged their own part in the confusions and captivities of the time; praised God for the theological ferment in the church; looked to the

Word of God in the Scriptures, to faithfulness to the ecumenical creeds, to the evangelical confessions and covenants, and to the Trinitarian content of their faith. They also called for fidelity to "the one Word of God we have to hear in life and in death." Populist theological colloquies have continued annually at this site in Craigville, Massachusetts. The 1994 colloquy presented Leander Keck for discussion of his *The Church Confident*. UCC President Paul Sherry provided critical response.

The Preamble to the UCC Constitution provided the framework for the inquiry, asserting, as it does, Christ as the "sole head" of the church, the authority of Scripture, and a commitment to the faith of the ancient creeds and the teachings of the Reformers, along with concern for the fresh interpretation of these beliefs *vis-à-vis* the issues and idioms of new times and places.

One of the small groups that met throughout the week questioned whether the excellent standards under discussion really functioned in the preaching and teaching of many congregations in which topicality reigned supreme. They also wondered whether these standards were operative in the denomination at large, in which various proposals were current, such as altering the baptismal formula and the naming of Christ as Lord (on the grounds that such practices "promoted sexism and hierarchy") and questioning the cross and the atonement (since such theology "legitimated child abuse"). With colloquy support and under the leadership of Frederick Trost, one of the founders of the Craigville Colloquies and now minister of the UCC Wisconsin Conference, *Confessing Christ* took form as a movement, affirming the Christological, biblical, and confessional stance of the UCC as

the necessary grounding for its social justice agenda.

Several months later, an invitation went out to the 450 people on the colloquy mailing list—mostly pastors—to attend one of three-day-long regional gatherings in the Midwest, New England, and Pennsylvania. The letter with 15 signatories—five pastors, four conference ministers, five professors, and one theological student (many with long histories of involvement in UCC struggles for social justice

"The time has come . . . for thoughtful, joyous, and imaginative theological work that undergirds our defining commitments."

and contemporaneity)—read, in part:

We believe that the future of our church depends on faithfulness to the one Word of the Triune God, Jesus Christ. . . . We are deeply concerned . . . that the commitment to "listen for God's word in Holy Scripture" and "in our rich heritage" is often neglected in our church. We view this indifference to Scripture and debilitating amnesia as a threat to the gospel. . . . We believe we here give voice to the often-silent center of our church. . . . The time has come . . . for thoughtful, joyous, and imaginative theological work that undergirds our defining commitments.

The reactions were immediate. From one segment of the church: "Is this the Biblical Witness Fellowship bashing the UCC again?" (The Biblical Witness Fellowship is an evangelical group that has organized parallel structures, judging the leadership of the UCC "apostate.") From another segment: "Is this a disguised effort of the UCC establishment to hold on to all the conservatives who are about to leave the denomination?" And from another: "Who says we don't pay attention to the Bible and don't have good theology?" And from still others: "This is obviously a group opposed to social justice." Along with criticisms, however, came an outpouring of letters and phone calls. And to the surprise of everyone, on short notice, 400 UCC pastors appeared at the regional meetings.

A factor in the response was the animated discussion in the UCC of a proposal to eliminate "Lord" from the new hymnal about to be published by its Board for Homeland Ministries (the word being deemed "sexist and hierarchical"). The response at the General Synod of the UCC that summer was a resounding vote admonishing the board not to do so. The heated debate underscored the degree to which *politically correct* but theologically untested considerations were alive and well in the UCC.²

Encouraged by the growing support of *Confessing Christ*, the Steering Committee decided to continue the regional meetings, enlarge the committee, formulate a statement of principles based on the UCC's constitution, and take as its 1994-1995 focus the essentials of UCC belief, considering, as well, a long-range project in writing a contemporary UCC catechism.³ Also created was a New England subcommittee to experiment with what a regional "theological center" might look like. Providing grist for the mill were the tapes of the controversial Re-Imagining Conference,

prompting the decision to refer pastors to this center to model the careful theological assessment that would be an alternative to both the polemics and evasions current in nervous mainline Protestant circles. Meanwhile, an Associated Press religion writer, hearing of this ferment, did a story on *Confessing Christ* that further stirred the waters.

The regional gatherings in the spring took place with 450 on hand, exploring UCC essentials based on historic texts from the UCC's four streams: Congregational, Reformed, Evangelical, and Christian. This time, more conference ministers signed the invitation letters now sent to all pastors and congregations in the regions. The widened sponsorship and the goal of including more laity posed new issues for *Confessing Christ*. Its critics appeared in some numbers pressing their concerns. Also, church members' lack of understanding of their own theological traditions became quickly apparent. How, therefore, does *Confessing Christ* keep its edge in such pluralist and educationally needy gatherings? How, also—as the numbers grow (with over a thousand now signed on) and as expectations vary—can the original purposes be pursued?

The Steering Committee wrestled with these questions and began to move in a two-pronged direction. Prong 1: The need for both theological conversation and theological education will be addressed by the regional meeting format: "You all come! Let's talk together about the issues." (In the fall 1994 meetings, a new UCC document, *Attentive to the Word*, is being discussed.) But the framework for these meetings will be *Confessing Christ's* commitments: the constitution's Christological, biblical, and confessional premises.

Prong 2: *Confessing Christ's* critical edge will be kept sharp in the developing centers. The New

England model will feature long-term research on the "Re-Imagining" materials, make critical assessments of proposals current in the UCC to alter the baptismal formula of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," and begin development of a UCC catechism. At the same time, educational and conversational components will be included with courses on "Christian basics" for laity, preaching *Christ* in Advent and Lent for clergy, and a workshop on the new UCC hymnal, with both the editorial chair and a chief critic of the

Confessing Christ is part of a re-forming that strives to bring heritage and horizon together.

hymnal on hand.

While the centers and the regional meetings are the primary expressions of *Confessing Christ*, the movement has made an appearance on Ecunet in a meeting with about 600 notes to date. Another offshoot is an order for daily prayer observed by 650 on the *Confessing Christ* lists, with intercessions each day for named participants.

Who pays for all this? So far the whole operation has cost no more than \$6000, with major expenses being the publication of a set of papers from the first regional meetings, the periodic conference calls of the Steering Committee, and mailing costs for notices and the orders for daily prayer. The money has come from the donations of supporters.

THE ECCLESIAL CENTER: POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS

The center is coming of age in mainline Protestantism. Challenging the popular thesis that society's culture wars have defined church life, Douglas Jacobsen and William Trollinger, Jr., have launched a major research project to identify a constituency that cannot be described or explained by simple left-right distinctions.⁴ *Confessing Christ* is an example of this new centrist phenomenon. Indeed, Jacobsen, a UCC member, took an active part in the first regional Pennsylvania meeting.

But what is a *centrist* in the church struggle today? The term is borrowed from cultural and political contexts. But as with all such analogies in theology and ecclesiology, it undergoes changes in its new locale. The *possibilities* as well as the *problems* of this phenomenon are related to this baptism and transformation. We take note of them from the *Confessing Christ* experience:

1. Like its cultural counterpart, the ecclesial *center* is to be distinguished from left and right camps. Unlike its cultural counterpart, this center is not a predictable middle-of-the-road posture. Instead, it is a declaration of independence from standard ideologies, a freedom under the Word to move "theologically to the right and politically to the left" (Reinhold Niebuhr) or a position that looks like neither. The line zigs and zags, making it very difficult for a middle-of-the-roader to travel. Of such is Christian liberty. Predictable conservatives and liberals both find this hard to understand, as their caricatures of *Confessing Christ* illustrate.

2. The ecclesial center cares deeply about the "centralities." Hence its passion for the doctrinal ABCs. So *Confessing Christ's* attention to the few theological charters that the UCC does have, affirming the sole lordship of Christ, the primacy of Scripture,

the resource role of the creeds and confessions, as well as the UCC's "ever-new light and truth" identity.

The center's concern for the basics is both an expression and reinforcement of a development in the wider Christian church. The revival of systematics in seminaries, and particularly the surge in the writing of comprehensive works in the discipline, is a sign of the times.⁵ The revisiting of the *loci*—the

commonplaces of classical teaching—may be related to the pleas from the laity who see vocal advocates of today's ideologies on television shows such as Donahue, Oprah, and Geraldo, and ask themselves, "Well, what do we believe?"⁶

3. The center finds itself not only between the two predictable positions of left and right, but also as a bridge over the chasm. As such, it is not only distinguishable from them but also a pathway between them. Part of its goal is "bridgework."

Confessing Christ's ancestry in the Craigville Colloquies indicates this aspect of the ecclesial center. The yearly gatherings at Craigville fix upon a critical theological issue and invite all so concerned to come for dialogue. Grassroots papers, representing a spectrum of points of view, are the major presentations at the colloquies. After animated discussion throughout the week, envired by prayer, Scripture and sacrament, convergences and divergences are identified, with more surprises about unanimity after the bridge crossings than originally thought possible. On these occasions we have seen the center hold as a support for the conversation so desperately needed in our balkanized time.

4. "Finding a voice" for the theological center is the caption of the Confessing Christ meeting on Ecunet. The overheated rhetoric of polarized positions has drowned out, perhaps also intimidated, those who do not fit

neatly into the culture-war grid—hence, the up-to-now often silent center of the contemporary church. As noted, Jacobsen and Trollinger are uncovering a submerged constituency in recent American church history. Reforming the center, however, is not only historical inquiry but also a call to voice the voiceless today and tomorrow. Confessing Christ is part of a re-forming that strives to bring heritage and horizon together.

Does its rise to audibility across denominational lines suggest possible alliances—even

How to "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk"—is the challenge to which mainline centrists are especially sensitive.

new denominational alignments? Perhaps the former, probably not the latter. Centrists are loyalists, striving to renew the given structures, wary of the sectarian temptations of both the right and left. Indeed, kinship of spirit may produce mutual communications and consolations. And the freedom of the Word makes anything possible in the adiaphora of denomination-ism. But for the foreseeable future, the center seems more likely to give its attention to its own home and the theological housecleaning to be done there.

5. How hard it is to walk this centerline! The two-pronged approach now chosen by Confessing Christ suggests the dangers. To advance the theo-

logical conversation, inviting all perspectives to a place at the table (Prong 1), is to pioneer territory long-neglected in mainline Protestantism. But what does this bridgework do to the critical edge of the center (Prong 2)? Will the Word be freed to say boldly "neither-nor!" when needed, as well as "both-and" when called for? Centrists worry about their work ending up as one more theological bull session on the one hand, or as a self-righteous and separatist diatribe on the other.

Another peril on this highwire of the center is how to witness to theological faithfulness, but not obscure the cultural mandates that are inextricable from that very faithfulness. How to "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk"—is the challenge to which mainline centrists are especially sensitive, given their history and commitments to social justice. And yet again, honoring the context as well as the text as centrists do, when is the time to declare an issue a legitimately "disputed question" properly on the agenda for a long and yet unresolved conversation, rather than a "here I stand" declaration? And vice versa? And where does one draw the centrist line on a controverted question for which there is sufficient biblical and confessional light? And how does one do it, "speaking the truth in love?"

Time will tell whether the possibilities or the problems will prevail. The future of the old-line/mainline is, finally, in the Lord's hands. But the ecclesial center, determined to resist the temptations of "culture-Protestantism," is destined to play a part in the struggles to come. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Leander Keck, *The Church Confident* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).
2. The board decided subsequently to replace "Lord" in references to Christ, in all the hymns from which it had been removed. For a review of the

issues of inclusive language and a spectrum of points of view, see the writer's "Ways of Inclusivity: The Language Debate," *Prism*, Vol 9, No. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 52-65.

3. While the "sexist" charges angered the signatories (there were no racist accusations, as the only two African-American conference ministers in the UCC were among the signatories), the enlarged Steering Committee now included five women.

4. The sponsors have lined out their theses with respect to both evangelical and ecumenical arenas in "Evangelical and Ecumenical," *The Christian Century*, Vol. 111, No. 21 (July 13, 1994), pp. 682-684.

5. See the author's "In Quest of the Comprehensive: The Systematics Revival," *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January 1994), pp. 7-12.

6. Theologians who bemoan theological illiteracy should practice what they preach. So the attempt of writer and spouse in *Christian Basics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991).

GABRIEL FACKRE, Ph.D., is the Abbot Professor of Christian Theology at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. His most recent books include *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* (Eerdmans, 1993) and *Christian Basics: A Primer for Pilgrims* (Eerdmans, third printing, 1993).



The Nature of the Spirit of Grace: Human Spirituality and the Spirit of God

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not of the nature of the human life of the spirit to achieve grace, but of the nature of the Spirit of grace to impart new and transformed life. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Bob McCullough, "The New Spin Is Spirituality," *Publishers Weekly* (May 16, 1994), pp. 40ff.

2. Michael Whelen, "Counterfeit Elements in Christian Spirituality: A Challenge for Theological Educators," *Journal of Spiritual Formation* (May 1994), pp. 211ff.

3. See, above all, his *Creation Spirituality: Liberating Gifts for the Peoples of the Earth* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1991). Cp. his earlier *Breakthrough, Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980).

4. The *locus classicus* for this schema is, of course, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a1.

5. Cp. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a1.8 et al. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. 3: *The Growth of Medieval Theology* (600-1300), pp.103, 284-293.

6. Luther's Works, 31, 11.

7. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, J.T. McNeill (ed.), F.L. Battles (trans.), (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), ii.1.viii-ix. Cf. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), pp. 80ff.

8. Frederic A. Brussat, "27 Ways to Live a Spiritual Life Everyday," *Utne Reader* (July-August 1994), pp. 91ff.

Spirituality of the Indian Road

—from page 11

knew that they had to raise money and dig for water. But they knew, too, that God provides water. They knew that they could appeal to the police for protection, but they knew, too, that, ultimately, it is God who is their defender in times of persecution. They knew they could keep their water for themselves, but they knew they represented not only themselves, but their God in their actions. When they made their decision, they knew that it was also God deciding through them to proclaim his love and reconciliation to the others in the village.

We in the West find it hard to abandon our two-tiered world—to see the order in nature not as autonomous, impersonal laws, but as God's habits as he maintains creation; to see in humans the image of God, marred by sin, but potentially made perfect through Christ; and to look at history as shaped not only by social, economic, or political forces, but also under the superintending rule of God. We need to see that our spiritual battles are fought on the mundane fields of ordinary life—in our day-by-day resistance to the temptations of pride, hatred, immorality, and self-centeredness. Love, joy, peace, patience, holiness, and the other fruit of the Spirit are lived out, not on some esoteric plane of life, but in the tangles of everyday life.

LOVE AND RECONCILIATION

How do Indian-village Christians respond to the Hindus and Muslims who dominate their society? There are occasional discussions, even debates, between them all. But dialogue and philosophical argument are the luxuries of the educated, affluent few. For most villagers, the questions of faith are more immediate and urgent. Whose god transforms lives and communities? This is why the decision by the Christians at Pedda Danvada to invite the others to draw water from their well spoke louder than words. Hindu and Muslim villagers claim that at times their gods, too, answer their prayers. But it amazes them to see Christians whose lives have been transformed by honesty, faithfulness, diligence, and, above all, love and compassion. They are rarely won to Christ by argument or dialogue, but they are drawn to Christians who are truly godly. Perhaps we can also learn about Christian witness from our sisters and brothers who live as powerless minorities in the growing churches around the world. ■

