



Creative **Transformation**

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Creative Transformation

exploring the growing edge of religious life

Volume 19.1-2 Winter/Spring 2010

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Process & Faith

EDITORIAL



In a 2008 lecture, historian Gary Dorrien talked about process theology as the only vital *school* in progressive Christianity today. He cited John Cobb's conviction that "Christianity has no essential nature aside from its transformative capacity. Creative transformation is the inclusive and inspiring ideal that progressive Christianity should stand for." In this issue we explore the idea of transformation through the lenses of the emergent church and creativity in ministry.

As anyone with even limited knowledge of the emergent church movement knows, the term is notoriously and contentiously difficult to define. I'll only venture to note two things. First, the emergent church dislikes labels, especially polarizing ones. Second, no matter what it is or is not, the emergent church is generating a lot of energy. On the basis of those two points alone, I propose that it is also transformational, and, as such, something that has growing appeal for process clergy.

Transformation. Philip Clayton is explicit in naming this whatever-it-is as not only transformational but necessary for the Christian faith. It is also decidedly not academic. Transformation theology—"Theology after Google"—he claims, is about bringing theology out of the ivory tower and onto the streets, out of the hands of professional theologians and into the hands of the laity. Bruce Epperly reminds us that spiritual practices can have this "bottom up" quality; moreover, practices that awaken us to the present moment are inherently process-oriented. In their conversation, Philip Clayton and Tony Jones explore ways to understand "doing" theology in this new context, and Tony challenges process clergy to come out of the closet about their theology. Tom Oord engages the "transforming theology" project and adds his own suggestion that theology "after Google"

is also a "networks" theology that finds "common ground with others, while simultaneously voicing the distinctive features of our own faith story."

Creativity. If the emergent church doesn't like polarizations such as progressive and conservative, then the same clearly applies to sacred and secular, as well as "high" culture and popular culture. L. Callid Keefe-Perry's article starts the process of demonstrating what this transformed theology looks like by shifting theology to theopoetics—a term gaining traction in theological conversations. He writes: "If we seek to radically renew and transform Christian theology, we will need not only new systematics, but new songs, new stories, and new sight." James Parker specifically enjoins us to make use of pop culture in ministry: in sermons, curricula—and not just films we watch, but videos we post on youtube. Chris Kleisen Wehrman, as a theater artist, makes the explicit connection between creativity in worship and process theology. (This article is also great as Process Theology 101, complete with an improvisational technique that not only helps explain but is fun to do.)

Now to a *mea culpa*. It's been a while since the last issue of *Creative Transformation*, and for that I offer you my apology. In fact, it's been so long that this became a double issue. But we'll be back on track with another issue later this summer.

This issue is noteworthy as the first one to be published online. And while I lament with others the tactile loss of paper, I confess it is a pleasure to take advantage of such online tools as hyperlinks and to work more liberally with color. I hope you enjoy it, too.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Dunne".

Theology after GOOGLE

by PHILIP CLAYTON



A note upfront to the reader: [Spencer Burke](#), [Tony Jones](#), [Tripp Fuller](#), I, and a bunch of others are embarked on a revolutionary project to get theology out of the classrooms (and pastors' studies) and into the streets (living rooms, pubs, etc). In this short post I write about this project under the title "Theology after Google."

Though I was trained as an academic theologian and have published a number of brainy books, I no longer believe in theory for theory's sake. This short post is no exception. I want to stimulate your mind, but I also want to get you to do something. (Of course, it's you who has to decide what you're going to do.)

The network I'm involved with—[TransformingTheology.org](#)—partnered in March 2010 with [TheOoze](#) to put on a first-of-its-kind event in southern California that was all about theology after Google: what it is and how to do it. We called it "leveraging new technologies and networks for transformative ministry." Our next event will be September 8-10 in Raleigh, NC: "[Big Tent Christianity: Being and Becoming the Church](#)," with folks like [Brian McClaren](#), [Diana Butler Bass](#), and [Phyllis Tickle](#). I hope this post will influence your view of what the church and its theologies need to become. I also hope it will convince you to come to Raleigh in September—to listen, and to speak your mind in response. -Philip Clayton

- Why is it that most Americans today don't walk down to their neighborhood church on Sunday mornings for worship, Sunday School, and a church potluck?
- Although some Christians seem to get it that "everything

must change," why is it that the vast majority don't seem to recognize the enormous changes that are already upon us?

- Do we really inhabit two different worlds: those who text, Twitter, blog, and get 80% of our information from the internet, and those who are "not comfortable" with the new social media and technologies?
- Could we today be facing a change in how human society is organized that is as revolutionary in its implications as was the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg over 500 years ago?
- If we are, what does all this have to do with theology and the church?

This is not Kansas anymore . . .

Let me not mince words: for better or worse, I've cast my lot with a rabbi named Jesus. That makes me one of his followers, whom individually people call "Christians," and who as a group are known as the church. Church will still exist in AD 2100. But I'm not convinced that Church 2100 will look anything like Church today.

Of course, church has theological definitions, such as "the Body of Christ," the community of the redeemed, the locus where the sacraments are celebrated, the place where Christians gather for worship, teaching, and community. But what church actually is has always been deeply affected by the world around it. When that world changes, so too does church. Everyone acknowledges that we are living in a time of revolutionary change. So tell me why we don't think church is in for some radical changes?

Consider this comparison. On the eastern seaboard in the 17th and 18th centuries, and in the expansion of a young nation westward toward the Pacific Ocean, churches played very specific social functions. Not only were they the cen-

ter of religious life, the place where one came to be baptized, married, and buried (“hatched, matched, and dispatched”) . . . and everything in between. They were also the heart and soul of the community—the center of social, communal, political, and even economic life. There was simply no other game in town. The church stood for the moral values of the community, “what made America great.” When you see the white steeples in a New England town, or when you drive through Midwest towns with a church on every corner, you realize how central a social institution the church once was.

But things have changed. It’s obvious that churches no longer play most of these social functions. We are now a massively pluralistic society living in an increasingly globalized world. Every major world religion is represented among United States citizens.

Take the question of authority. In the frontier town, the Southern city, or the New England village there was the authority of the law and the government. A lot of folks weren’t very educated, so they didn’t read much, and there was no radio or TV. The pastor of the church was not only the moral and spiritual authority—the representative of the only true religion and its obviously true scriptures—but also probably the most educated person in town. He (there were virtually no female pastors!) spoke with authority on a wide variety of issues that were important to the society of his day.

Contrast that with today’s situation. Rarely are pastors approached as figures of authority, except (sometimes!) within their own congregations.

Radio, television, and the internet are our primary authorities for the information we need, with newspapers, advertisements, and movies coming in a close second. For many American Christians Beliefnet.com (“Your Trusted Source for Free Daily Inspiration & Faith”) is a bigger authority on matters of Christian belief and practice than any pastor. We love

We love self-help books, so we’re more likely to read *Spirituality for Dummies* than to go to a group Bible study.

self-help books, so we’re more likely to read *Spirituality for Dummies* than to go to a group Bible study. Forty years ago people were influenced in their judgments about religious matters not only by their pastor but also by the editorials in the Religion section of their local newspaper. Today the blogs one happens to read are more likely to influence beliefs.

Where’s the revolution?

I’m almost embarrassed to list these differences, because they’re so obvious. But here’s the amazing fact: Denominations aren’t changing. In most cases they’re not planning for and investing in new forms of church for this brave new world. (There are some great exceptions.)

This is not a matter of blame. The assignment of the administrators who head up denominations is to run the organization that they’ve been given. I

once heard a major national leader say to a group of similar leaders something like, “We all know that the ship is in grave danger, and it may go down. But we all seem to have the attitude, ‘Not on my watch!’”

Pastors have a bit more latitude. Individual pastors and churches are doing amazing things across the U.S. (and outside it); so are para-church and extra-church groups, organizations, and ministries. But in most cases, it’s the denominations that determine how pastors are educated, what kinds of ministries they can engage in, and what kinds of church assignments they get. A lot of young men and women lose their idealism in seminary. (That’s a damning fact that I, as a seminary teacher, take very, very seriously.) If they have the good fortune to depart seminary with their idealism intact, they’re generally assigned to a traditional church that has virtually no youth or younger families present, an average age of 60, and a major budget crisis on its hands. The orders are, “Keep this church alive!” The church members like the old hymns and liturgies; they don’t like tattoos, rock music, or electronics. They are about as likely to read and respond to blogs as I am to play in the Super Bowl. So the young pastor folds her idealism away in a closet and struggles to offer the traditional ministry that churches want.

In short: the majority of our resources continue to be flung at traditional church structures. Those doing the real revolutionary work, those trying to envision—and incarnate—the church of the future struggle on with the barest of resources.

This is not smart. Let's do something different. Let's do it now.

Theology after Google

I used to think of theology as an academic discipline. Although about Christian beliefs, its primary goal was to meet the standards of the Academy. When I finally got the stars out of my eyes and began to look around more closely, I realized that the “trickle-down effect”—the idea that the brainy books in academic theology flow through pastors to help congregations and ordinary Christians—is no longer happening. If it ever did. By and large academic theologians are not addressing the questions that lay Christians are asking; or they're answering them so incomprehensibly that only other academic theologians understand them.

Now when I use the term “theology” I mean the questions that all Christians ask and the kinds of answers that ordinary people give, no matter how hesitating and uncertain. This new definition has a wonderful implication: theology is tightly bound to whatever church is at a given time. Theology is about what the church is now and what it's becoming. So “theology after Google” means: What must the church become in a Google-shaped world?

Here's my answer in five theses. Whether you love them or hate them, I hope you'll interact with them:

1 Theology is not something you consume, but something you produce. In the Age of Gutenberg, you read theology in a book; you heard it preached in sermons; and you were taught it by Bible teachers. In the

Age of Google, theology is what you do when you're responding to blogs, contributing to a wiki doc or google doc, marking up a Word doc on your computer, participating in worship, inventing new forms of “ministry,” or talking about God with your friends in a pub.

No institutions, and very few persons, function as authorities for theology after Google.

I remember participating in 1991 in the birth of what would eventually become the worldwide web. (People now call it Web 1.0.) One used a protocol called “ftp” to access documents on someone else's computer. No mouse and no pictures, but still: amazing—you could read someone else's stuff without needing a floppy disk! What most of us now do is Web 2.0. We contribute to, mold, and play at the places we visit; we go there to do things. (If you're unsure about this, watch a kid playing on the web. My seven-year-old twins will click on anything anywhere on any webpage to see what'll happen and what it will do. The idea that the internet is about passive reading of content never occurred to them.)

2 No institutions, and very few persons, function as authorities for theology after Google. Ever since Jesus' (often misunderstood) statement about Peter that “on this rock

I will build my church” (Mt. 16), the church has had issues with authority. The point is too obvious to need examples. The pastor standing up in the pulpit in the early 1960s was still a major authority. Of course, pastors still stand up in pulpits today, and some still view themselves as indispensable purveyors of truth.

But the world is changing around us. Those of us who speak in pulpits are having to rethink our relationship with the audiences we address. Most people today shrug their shoulders at those who claim to be authorities in religious matters. (For many of us, scripture continues to be an authority, but the way in which it's an authority has changed massively over the last 30 years. More on that topic the next time I write.) Theology today means what some number of us find plausible about our faith or are convinced of. Our leaders are people like Brian McLaren or Tony Jones or Spencer Burke—people who say things that ring true to us, so that we say, “Yeah, I think that guy's got some important insights. I'm going to read his blog or find a way to talk with him, and I'm going to recommend to my friends that they do the same.”

3 Theology after Google is not centralized and localized. Likewise, the church cannot be localized in a single building. We find church wherever we find Jesus-followers that we link up with who are doing cool things. This point is huge. Denominational officials and many pastors have not even begun to conceive and wrestle with what it means to work for a church without a clear geographical location.

4 The new Christian leader is a host, not an authority who dispenses true teaching, wise words, and the sole path to salvation. I first really got the host idea in a conversation with Spencer, and it has turned my understanding of Christian leadership upside down. Today, the leaders who influence our faith and action are those who convene (or moderate or enable) the conversations that change our life—or the activities that transform our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our God. It could be an older Christian who convenes discussions at a church, a house, or a pub. It could be [Shane Claiborne](#) leading an activity at The Simple Way on Potter Street in Philadelphia, say a time of gardening in the communal garden that gives you a sense of community that you’ve rarely had but always longed for. It could be a website or a blogger that you frequently go to, where you read others’ responses and add your own thoughts. Christian leadership is about enabling significant community around the name of Jesus, wherever two or more are gathered in His name.

5 Theology after Google does not divide up the world between the “sacred” and the “secular,” as past theologies so often did. All thought and experience bears on it, and all of one’s life manifests it. Thus the distinction between one’s “ministry” and one’s “ordinary life” is bogus. All of one’s life as a Christian is missional. The great 15th-century theologian and mystic [Nicholas of Cusa](#) imagined God as a circle whose radius is infinite and whose center is everywhere. It only takes a second to realize that Cusa’s picture wreaks havoc on all geometries of “inside” and “outside.”

Here’s the picture: I find myself a follower of Jesus; that part seems to stick and to deepen the longer I live. I’m not sure exactly how I got here; it’s almost like it happened to me. I call it grace. I find others around me who follow the same Teacher and who therefore struggle with many of the same questions and issues that I have. They help me understand myself and remain faithful to my Guide. I call them church.

But what exactly do I believe? What must I say, and what should I not say (and do)? This quest is more open-ended. It’s filled with uncertainties and indecisions, and it’s con-

stantly evolving. That quest just is theology. It’s everything I think about and do. It’s reading the *New York Times* headlines online each morning when I awake. It’s the philosophy text that I teach in a classroom or the intriguing idea about christology that I talk about with friends over a beer. It’s our attempts to be involved in authentic forms of ministry and Christian community, and the questions we ask about whether those attempts are really faithful and how to make them better. It’s that recurring question, “What should I do with my life?”

In the book that Tripp Fuller and I just published, *Transforming Christian Theology*, we argue that theology is about attempting to answer the Seven Core Christian Questions. These questions have impressive-sounding names: theology proper, anthropology, soteriology, christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, eschatology. But they are really just the simple, recurring questions that every Christian wonders about as he or she struggles to be a Jesus disciple: Who is God? What are human beings? How are we separated from God, and how can that separation be overcome? Who is Jesus Christ? What or Who is the Spirit? What is the church, and what should it be doing? And what is our hope for the final future of the cosmos and humanity?

These do not have to be high-falutin’ debates sprinkled

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liberally with Greek and German technical terms. The most humble attempts to answer these questions, in word and action, are as authentically theology as are the rarified debates within the Ivy Tower—indeed, they may be more authentic than what academic theologians do. Call it the Theology of the Widow’s Mite.

All right, what can we do?

Theology after Google is about what you do, not about passively reading stuff. So here’s what I hope:

- I hope you’ll comment on this post. Take a minute to write

a sentence or two of response. I am equally intrigued by disagreements as about agreements. Participate! That's what counts. The rest is merely listening, a kind of theological voyeurism.

- Talk about these issues with friends. Blog and post on your own. If you go to a church, talk with church leaders about theology after Google. Set up a discussion group in your home or some other venue. Theology after Google (Church 2.0) is a network of networks. Every group and every network counts.

- Come to the “[Big Tent Christianity: Being and Becoming the Church](#),” conference September 8-10 in Raleigh, NC. Check it out at [TransformingTheology.org](#). Interact with Brian McClaren, Keith Ward, Phyllis Tickle, Diana Butler Bass, Bill Leonard, Tony Jones, Harvey Cox, Tony Jones, Spencer Burke, Tripp Fuller, and other speakers. Participate in the workshops. Let your voice be heard, and thereby change what other people take home. Be transformed by what you hear, and then “go thou and do likewise”!

*Philip Clayton is Professor of Theology at Claremont School of Theology and head of the [TransformingTheology.org](#) project. He made the journey from conservative evangelical to liberal before staking his tent with the emergent church. His most recent books are *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action and Transforming Christian Theology*. He blogs [here](#).*



being and becoming the church.

Why “Big Tent Christianity”?

In the old days revival tents were set up outside towns and cities across the South. The people of God would join together for celebration, community, and revival. The revival tent was a sign of Christian unity and Christian renewal—the ongoing and active work of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

What would happen if Christians came together from across the country to proclaim what unites us as followers of Jesus Christ and as His disciples in this modern world? Some two dozen leading Christian speakers from around the country will be assembling in Raleigh for this event. They will share with you new and innovative forms of church-based ministry and renewal—new ways of being and becoming the church. And they will inspire you with their vision for how we can speak even more powerfully in and to the world of the 21st century.

Schedule and Costs

Big Tent Christianity will begin at 1:00 Wednesday afternoon, September 8, and end Thursday evening, September 9, at 6 p.m. All sessions will be held at New Community Church of Raleigh, 9621 Six Forks Road, Raleigh, NC. Rooms are available at the La Quinta Inn and Suites (Raleigh-Crabtree) for a special conference rate of \$98/night. To place reservations, call 1-866-527-1498 and tell them you are members of the Big Tent Christianity conference. The hotel is located at: 2211 Summit Park Lane, Raleigh, NC 27612

September 8-9, 2010 • Raleigh, NC

Emerging PROCESS theology after GOOGLE

by BRUCE G. EPPERLY



More than a decade ago, when the internet was just taking hold, I had an interesting conversation with one of my son's high school teachers. An experienced teacher, she admitted that "just a few years ago, students had difficulty getting enough information for research projects; now they have too many sources of information and little ability to distinguish between what is helpful and what is not." For those of us interested in transforming theological and spiritual practices, this teacher's counsel is both a challenge and an inspiration. Motivated by Whitehead's admonition that the higher organisms originate novelty to match the novelty of the environment, we are committed to exploring new ways of doing theology; developing lively spiritual practices that reflect our pluralistic, nano-second, whitewater world; and creating new forms of church that join ancient and future in a creative and emerging now.

As I ponder the shape of emerging process spirituality and theology in the age of Google,¹ with Brian McLaren I affirm that "everything must change" including how we embrace the creative wisdom of the past and welcome novel and chaotic present and future. Kierkegaard once noted that people are often paralyzed when they are confronted with too many or too few possibilities. As the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Report, "[Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths](#)"² suggests, most progressive Christians are on the verge of embracing too many possibilities as we seek to construct a fluid, life-transforming vision of reality and vital spiritual practices in a world in which nearly 25% of North Americans join traditional faiths with beliefs in reincarnation, crystals, creative visualization, wiccan and pagan, and First American practices. These days,

it is not just Unitarian Universalists who celebrate pagan holidays (winter solstice) in the same week as they celebrate Christmas; it might even be the evangelical Christian next door!³ Further, in many moderate and progressive congregations, there is often more interest and energy in adult education classes around best sellers such as *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Secret*, *The Shack*, and *The Power of Now*, than in studying scripture. Courses in Tai Chi and yoga, held in church parlors and social halls, often have greater attendance than classes in Christian prayer or meditation. Interest in complementary and energy medicine techniques such as reiki, therapeutic, and healing touch is often greater than in liturgical healing services.⁴ This is not bad news, but rather the opportunity for a new reformation, a progressive creative synthesis grounded in our originating

novelty to match the spiritual novelty of the environment. It is an opportunity to grow in wisdom and stature as we integrate diverse forms of faith around an evolving and centered vision of Christianity.

In an age of global information networking, the question for progressive Christians is "what forms of novelty shall we originate to match the novelty of our current eclectic and pluralistic environment?" Years ago the term "designer religion" was employed to critique current trends of spiritual eclecticism; in contrast to this derogatory use of the term "designer religion," I believe that faithful Christians are challenged to "design" spiritualities that respond to the "democracy of revelation" not only characteristic of contemporary spiritualities but also reflective of God's presence in the

world. As progressives, we need to affirm that divine omnipresence means that all persons are touched by God and that although spiritualities may differ in depth and stature and in their

These days, it is not just Unitarian Universalists who celebrate pagan holidays; it might even be the evangelical Christian next door!

ability to promote spiritual insight and wholeness, still God is at work in every spiritual path, guiding all toward greater maturity and insight. We also need to remember that lively theology is “open source,” reflecting the abundant and open source God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” Truth and spiritual experience is not a “zero sum,” static, and limited reality, but an open-ended, ever-evolving and ever-emerging process. As John’s gospel and other Christian spiritual guides have noted, there is always “more light” to be shed on the scriptures and our experiences of God.

Open and multi-channel revelations call us to spiritualities and theologies of depth, breadth, and gravitas as progressive Christians. Recognizing that information and wisdom are not synonymous with one another, nor that all paths are equally helpful and insightful, we progressives need first to deepen our own spiritual and theological practices, whether we appropriate ancient wisdom or discover new pathways of the spirit in our time. We need a spiritual center—or perhaps

theological spiral—from which to evaluate and embrace the spiritual pluralism of our time. Accordingly, healthy theology and spirituality involve embracing spiritual otherness in the context of theologically and spiritually grounded personal and communal self-affirmation. While I see Christianity as pluralistic and evolving, a growing communal faith requires enough self-definition to creatively embrace and transform the plethora of spiritual practices and images that emerge from the internet and the ambient pluralism of our time. Although our Christian stories are always perspectival and limited—after all, “we have this treasure in earthen vessels”—we can claim “good enough” and “true enough” practices and faith stories.

As a process theologian, I believe that progressive and process Christianity provides one such lively, fluid, evolving, and centered story. While I will not specifically describe process theology’s emerging story, let me share a few process insights appropriate to “theology and spirituality after Google.”

First: Theology after Google inspires us to embrace creative communal Christian stories. For progressive Christians, these stories involve the dynamic call and response of a relational God; the intimacy of God’s presence in the life and ministry of Jesus whom we call Christ; divine revelation in science, literature, and the non-human world; God’s quest for healing and abundant life in body, mind, spirit, and relationships; radical hospitality and the welcome of strangers; the

universality of revelation and our ability to experience God in every aspect of our daily lives; and the wideness of God’s mercy and care in this life and the next. These stories are the crucible, the container, within which creative synthesis occurs personally and communally. They are our spiritual DNA that enables us to embrace the world within the permeable, yet sustainable, boundaries of faith.

Second: We are called, “after Google,” to develop lively evolving spiritual practices, updating ancient practices of worship and spiritual practices for our nano-second world. This is especially essential insofar as nearly 50% of Americans claim to have had mys-

We need a spiritual center—or perhaps theological spiral—from which to evaluate and embrace the spiritual pluralism of our time.

tical experiences. Evolving and lively spiritual practices help us experience ourselves as part of the God-stories we affirm and respond to the growing affirmation of mysticism in our culture. Virtually every Christian practice can be “updated” and “transformed” for our times. No longer bound to monastic communities, we can create 21st-century versions of Benedictine *lectio divina*, Ignatian imaginative prayer, Jesus’ healing touch, and contemplative prayer. Media and icons

can be used as ways of encountering the Holy Adventure moving in all things. We can create Christian theological and spiritual affirmations that provide contrasting and complementary alternatives to nonChristian and new age affirmations.⁵

Third: We are called to affirm an emerging centered pluralism that spirals forth from our experience and understanding of Jesus as the Christ and the wealth of the Christian tradition to encompass and transform the diverse spiritualities we experience. This quest calls progressives to take theology seriously—to articulate lively and relevant theological visions that emerge from and shape our experience of God’s presence in the world—whether in the traditional practices of prayer, meditation, worship, hospitality, and justice-seeking, and service or in the pluralistic panorama of workplace and family life. With process theologian Bernard Loomer, we are called as communities and individuals to create theologies of stature and size that open rather than close us to God’s movements in our unique and evolving time. Pluralism and constant change call us to become more insightful and critical theologians, whose theological reflection exists in a dynamic call and response with the gifts of scripture, tradition, reason, and spiritual experience; the presence of God in culture; and the ordinary revelatory moments of everyday life.

Virtually every Christian practice can be “updated” and “transformed” for our times.

Notes

1. Inspired by the Claremont School of Theology/Center for Process Studies conference on “Theology after Google,” March 10-12, 2010. For more information, see [Transforming Theology](#).
2. Pew Research Center/Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “[Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths](#)” (December 2009).
3. According to the Pew Report, roughly 10-15% of white self-described evangelical Christians take seriously yoga, astrology, energy work, and reincarnation.
4. For more on the creative integration of Christian and non-Christian approaches to healing and wholeness, see Bruce Epperly, *God’s Touch: Faith, Wholeness, and the Healing Miracles of Jesus and Healing Worship: Purpose and Practice*; and Bruce and Katherine Epperly, *Reiki Healing Touch and the Way of Jesus*.
5. For more on 21st-century process/progressive practices, see Bruce Epperly, *Holy Adventure: 41 Days of Audacious Living*.

Bruce Epperly is Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Continuing Education at Lancaster Theological Seminary and co-pastor of Disciples United Community Church in Lancaster, PA. He is the author of sixteen books, including Holy Adventure: 41 Days of Audacious Living and Tending to the Holy: The Practice of the Presence of God in Ministry (with Kate Epperly).

A few guideposts in spirit-centered progressive spirituality

A recovery of prayer as a pathway of awakening to the sacrament of the present moment. Although we do not expect supernatural violations of the laws of nature in response to our prayers, we can pray with the expectation that the act of prayer joins us with God and those for whom we pray, awakens us to new perspectives, and (I believe) creates a positive field of force around those for whom we pray, thus, enabling God to be more active in their lives.

A commitment to easily learned meditative/contemplative practices such as breath prayer (breathing in God’s spirit, exhaling stress); centering prayer (focusing on a prayer word, such as “peace,” “joy,” “love”).

A discovery of Christian affirmations that transform our minds and actions. (Short sentences aimed at transforming the way we experience reality, such as “Nothing can separate me from the love of God,” “God’s light shines in all creation, even those with whom I contend.”)

A commitment to joining heart and hands in social activism—praying our political action and seeing Christ in those whom we serve. ~ From [Epperly’s entry on Bob Cornwall’s blog, April 2010](#).

TRANSFORMING Christian theology: a conversation with Philip CLAYTON and Tony JONES



Philip Clayton: Here I am with Tony Jones and he's excited about contributing to this feature of *Creative Transformation* on the Transforming Theology project. Tony, I think I have one basic question that I want to probe. I've got a lot of different ways to put it but the basic question is this: transforming Christian theology is about giving the-

ology back to the laity, taking it out of the ivory tower and taking it out of the hands of an elite class of professionals. What I want to explore with you is: what does that mean? What does it look like in practice? What kind of effects is it going to have?

Tony Jones: Well, I think that one of the best explanations I've ever heard for the demise of liberal theology and the mainline church is that it's a result of success, not a result of failure. In the late 19th century and for the first half of the 20th century, the liberal version of Christianity had such a framing story for all of America: individual rights; justice; autonomy; personal responsibility; all these things. There became very little difference between the mainline church and American liberal democracy.

PC: The curse of success.



TJ: Right, I mean really, like, why go to church? Every institution I'm a part of values independence, freedom, equality, autonomy, rationality.

PC: It's not like liberal theology went secular; it's like the secular world got it, bought into it.

TJ: Yeah. So why go to church and hear a sermon about individuality and freedom and equality

and justice? I already believe those things. There's nothing different. So then progressives became chaplains to the culture.

PC: When we think of the pinnacle of liberal theology in the 20th century, that was that sign of its final success. The presidents consulted with liberal theologians.

TJ: Right. President Kennedy, even President Johnson, probably even President Nixon. If all the United Methodist bishops got together and wrote a letter saying, we really oppose the Viet Nam war, the president thought, whoa, these people represent a lot of people. I have to do something. I have to respond to this somehow. And if all the United Methodist bishops in the country were to write a letter to George W. Bush, he wouldn't even open the envelope.

PC: No.

TJ: He doesn't care.

PC: A secretary would write a response.

TJ: Yeah. Thank you for your concern. He doesn't care about what the United Methodist bishops think about the Iraq war.

PC: No. In what way was academic liberal theology, from the 1960s to 2000, a response to this success? How did it happen that theology became an academic guild? What went wrong?

TJ: I don't know that I have such a great response to that. All I know is that when I was at Dartmouth College, the Campus Crusade staff told me I should go to Dallas Seminary. My pastor at home told me I should go to Union in New York City. And I knew enough to look around. There was no internet at the time, but when you would ask people about what was going on at Union, they would say, "Oh,

it's all queer theology." Like that was their hallmark, right? And at Dallas, all they do is millennial dispensational.

PC: Neither one was going to work.

TJ: There's got to be something in between those two, and I ended up at Fuller which, quite honestly, looking back, I still am proud to claim myself as a graduate of Fuller—because it combined academic integrity with evangelical zeal. Not many places can do that.

PC: I know.

TJ: But it really did have an evangelical zeal and it really did have academic integrity. I mean, it's no Yale; it's no Claremont; it's no Harvard. But they have top quality professors. I studied with Nancey Murphy and Miroslav Volf, and we were reading John Hick and John Cobb. Fuller wasn't as closed off as people would say it is. In fact, it's for that very reason that it's always disparaged by Taoists and Gordon Conwell, because it allows people to read John Hick, right?

PC: And John Cobb.

TJ: And John Cobb.

PC: So, Tony, you're a famous advocate of theology in the hands of the laity, and you're a famous critic of the guild of academic theology. Tell us what lies at the core of your resistance. A lot of people think that's iconoclastic; even more, they think it's damaging. Tell us; what do you have in mind when you say, "I'm not sure of the value of academic theology"?

TJ: I remember reading, several years ago, a piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, where they'd done a study on average readership of an article in a scholarly journal, and the average readership of an article in a scholarly journal was four. That's the average. That's the average! How many get one—or zero? Like, my wife read it! So you've got that on the one hand. There's just an overabundance of these discrete guilds that all write to one another.

And the whole tenure system, I just think, is laughable, because it's so based on the interlogic in the system. Learning the system, beating the system. Look, I was in a fraternity, and I remember, on hell night, one of the guys was trying to get us to pledge and go through that whole thing. I told him, "You know I'm a Christian and I really want to join this fraternity but this is crazy. Why are you making us do

all this stuff where we're drunk and naked all night? It's so bizarre." And he said to me—I mean, he was pretty drunk at the time but I think he was being honest—"I had to do it. Now you have to do it." And I think that's what every sargeant in the Marine Corps thinks, and every tenured professor says, "Look, I had to do it; by God, you have to do it, too." So I think there's a lot of human nature involved. And here's the other thing. For all the ways I've been blessed by books written by people who have tenure and are in the guild and are great brilliant theologians, that whole system comes from a different era—18th, 19th-century German research universities: president, provost, adjunct, assistant, associate, full professor; all that stuff. It comes from a different era, and that was an era when the trickle-down theory of knowledge worked.

PC: What is it about meetings of academic theologians? What do you see there that disturbs you? These are people who are trying to rightly divine the word of God and interpret the Christian gospel for our age.

TJ: (Laughs.) Transcribe the chuckle. When I was in seminary, we would get the program for the AAR (American Academy of Religion) that would announce all the papers being read at the meeting, and we would go through them and laugh, and circle the ones that were the most obscure and obtuse and so—I mean, you couldn't imagine something more distantly removed from the actual life of communities of faith on the ground. And for all their faults, evangelicals have never lost sight of that. For all of their trying to keep up with the Joneses, and for all those of us who are more progressive, looking superciliously at these evangelical "scholars" in air quotes, I guess I would forsake tenure and academic publishing to change the church; I would forsake that.

**I would forsake
tenure and academic
publishing to change
the church.**

PC: So let's come right to an example that you have of theology in the hands of the laity; theology being done by people without academic degrees who are trying to think about what they believe and why they do what they do as a Christian community. Maybe you just want to hit us with some examples.

In the circles I travel in, *theology* is one of the most exciting words in the human language. People love it. “Justice?” Blasé. Overused, overdone. If I get another email telling me about how I should be just, I can’t handle it, right? But when it comes to theology, people are hungry for it.

TJ: Yeah. Well, I have a good friend who lives in Missouri and comes to the church, called [Solomon’s Porch](#), that I’m a part of. We all call him Trucker Frank; he drives a truck. He’s part of a house church—a bunch of people who’ve kind of fled evangelicalism and fundamentalism and pentecostalism in rural Missouri. So he drives a truck; he’s a long haul, over-the-road trucker, and he teaches Greek to people in his little house church on Thursday mornings. Some of them are kids who’ve dropped out of high school. I’ve met these kids and interviewed them for my dissertation. He teaches them Greek! When I wrote a book on the Didache, I borrowed three commentaries from him. He’s my theological library.

At our church, Solomon’s Porch, we recognize that there are those of us around whom power would naturally accumulate, and we’ve tried to divest ourselves of that. That’s not to say my community doesn’t value my theological training and expertise; they do. My title is Theologian-in-Residence. But the thing about our community is, anybody can claim any term “in-Residence.” So you could be the Truck Driver in-Residence. You could be the Lawn Mower Repairman in-Residence. You could be the Janitor in-Residence. Whatever. That’s the kind of community we want, so we’re all equivalent on that scale. But what we all do is, we bring our own expertise to the hermeneutic task.

PC: What I want to understand is this: when we give theology back to the laity, when we let it be something that any Christian does as part of her own existence, what function does that

have in the community? What power does it have? How does it become transformative? A lot of people who hear the word “theology” don’t think of it as transformative at all. I want to understand its dynamics. What happens? How does it get changed? It becomes something brand new, this word, “theology.”

TJ: Yeah. What’s hard for me is to go back to that place you’re talking about, because, for me, the circles I travel in, theology literally—I kid you not—is one of the most exciting words in the human language. People love it; they get off on it. “Justice?” Blasé. Overused, overdone. If I get another sojo email telling me about how I should be just, I can’t handle it, right? But when it comes to theology, you don’t get emails, weekly emails, telling you about theology. People are hungry for it. So we run these events with Jürgen Moltmann or Miroslav Volf, and 150-200 people show up. Then you start meeting laypeople who’ve taken time off of work to come to this. And they’re slogging through heavy German theology. So I don’t know why, but the people I hang around with think theology is enthralling and fascinating.

PC: Wow, that’s great! Our journal is called *Creative Transformation*, and we believe that there can be a kind of theological reflection that contributes to creative transformation. I wonder if you’ve seen that as you’ve traveled, as you’ve visited churches, as you’ve dealt with emergent cohorts. Where have you seen this kind of reflection being transformative? What’s that look like?

TJ: It looks like something you and I have already talked about—a com-

munal hermeneutic. I think we're at a funny liminal time, like when Luther said, "Here! Here's the Bible. I've translated it into your language. You get to figure it out now." And I think that was enthralling, exciting, fascinating, wonderful, incredible for people at the time. Now, here we are, five centuries later, and people are like, "I think I'm in a little bit over my head on this whole Bible thing." They try to read the Bible, and there are just so many out there, and everyone you meet has tried to do the one-year Bible and failed, and they feel incompetent to approach this text.

At the same time, they don't want to put the Bible back into the hands of the priests and say, "Look, just do it for me; I'm going to outsource this." But they do feel a little overwhelmed, like, Luther gave me too much authority. So the people I'm around, they want to ensconce themselves into a hermeneutic community where they feel like their voice is really valid, but their voice is one in a chorus of voices, trying to figure out the text.

PC: I have a very specific question. If theology becomes ordinary Christians trying to figure out the text, in a community, for this world, how will theology transform? What parts of what used to be the definition of theology fall off the table and what new features come in? I'm trying to get a sense of this different activity, this different process, just starting fresh.

TJ: I think that one of the things is for people like you and me and other people who are in guilds, and pastors; we need to stop thinking about theology as second-order discourse, and we need to think about theology

as what people do. Everything you do, how you drive in a traffic jam, how you teach your class; everything is inherently theological. We need to stop thinking about like, theology's when we sit back and scratch our chin and reflect on the nexus of divine and human action. I think theology IS the nexus of divine and human action. It's

We need to think about theology as what people do.

that moment. Some of us have the luxury of stepping back and doing the second-order discourse about that moment, but that moment is theology. I think that moment is theology.

PC: Do you really get rid of the sense of a separate activity? Hegel said the owl of Minerva only flies at dusk; philosophy only rises to reflection when the activities of the day are done. And you're saying that we need to replace that view of theology with theology that is just what we are doing when we try to be followers of Jesus.

TJ: That's what I would say. John Franke and I have debated over this, because he thinks, no, no, no. That's discipleship. Theology is reflection. Maybe it's just a mental exercise for us who are theologians, but I think that will help us to disabuse ourselves of this notion that theology is this enterprise reserved for those of us who've been trained in these particular rhythms of thought and these particular discrete rationalities—

PC: Languages—

TJ: Right. Where we get to talk about

what other people do and how they live their lives.

PC: You told an example today of a disabled person leading worship at Solomon's Porch and helping that person with a problem that arose. Would you say that what happened as people helped him out was theology? Would you go that far?

TJ: Yeah.

PC: Seriously?

TJ: Yes. This young man speaks through a computer. He's not able to speak using his vocal chords, so he programs in what he wants to say, and it takes him a long time to type it in with one finger. He had pre-programmed his introduction for communion. We have a different person introduce communion each week at Solomon's Porch. Halfway through his introduction, his computer crashed and he had to reboot the whole thing, which took five minutes probably. I think what Pierre Bourdieu would have done is stepped back and watched. Even the physical characteristics of how our community responded to that—people turned and started talking to one another; a couple people went to help him out. Nobody seemed overly awkward or anxious about it. Now, I've been in many worship environments where if one little thing goes wrong, it's like everybody is on eggshells. What are we going to do now? And it's very awkward. I remember being in a service where this very gifted preacher lost her place in her manuscript for thirty seconds, probably, and it seemed like an eternity. We sat there in silence. We were embarrassed for her; we were

embarrassed for ourselves. So I know those moments, and a lot of people who've been in formal liturgical-type settings know those moments. We didn't have any of that. So I would like to think that the way our community responded to his computer crash was theological; we had a theological response to it.

PC: That's a beautiful description of what this new understanding of theology looks like in the worshipping community. I just have a few final questions I want to hear your responses to. One, is there any connection to the tradition of what theological reflection has been? So, is this a completely in-the-now moment, or does it link back to the history of Christians reflecting, that is, historical theology or the great systematic texts of the past?

TJ: I think that if we're going to overturn something significant in the history of the church, something that was agreed upon by Augustine and Luther and Aquinas or whatever; I think the burden of proof is on us. I think we're in conversation not only with one another but with the great theologians of the past, and all the billions of laypeople who lived out those theological systems—so I think the burden of proof is on us, if we're going to overturn something like that. But I don't think they get to trump us. Just because they're older and their stuff hung around. I like to think Augustine and I would have gotten along really well. I like to think that if I were sitting down with Augustine over a glass of wine, I would've said, "Look, we're trying to do what you were doing. You were dealing with the stuff that confronted you of the day." So for Augustine, you know, here's this guy who's a Manichean and has this very hardcore neo-platonic dualism between good and bad, and it is just absolutely unthinkable that the great immaterial mind of God would ever deign to touch human flesh in any way, and then he has this Pentecostal-type born-again experience in the garden and, suddenly, he's converted himself to a religion where God took on disgusting earthly sinful flesh—the worst thing a Manichean could imagine—meat! Meat! God was a meat-puppet! That's bad news for a Manichean. So he's like, what do I do

with this? And he finds solace in the Trinity; the theory of the Trinity. He takes this nascent Trinitarian doctrine and he really makes it robust and beautiful, I think. So I love that; I love that he did that. But let's be honest; he did that because of his own theological dilemma—how can God be meat? Okay, well, leave part of God in Heaven, where God still is immaterial . . .

PC: He's not meat.

TJ: Right. And have another part of God who is Spirit, who's not meat. So only part of God is made meat. One of God's Persons is meat. And then 19 hundred years later, along comes Moltmann, or somebody, who says, I love

the Trinity, but for a different reason. Here we are in a world lacking in true relationality, and here we have Levinas, and Derrida, and these Jewish philosophers, saying, the reason the Nazis never looked me in the face is that they forgot the face. They forgot relationality. They dehumanized me; I was a Jew. I was not a human being in the image of God. And so you've got these theologians who come

along and say, the Trinity works for us, but for a different reason. Not because I worry about God being meat, but because I worry about God being dehumanized. And what does that mean? So . . .

PC: Same doctrine; new reason for it. And this brings me to the last question. *Creative Transformation* speaks for many pastors and laypeople who have found in process thought a powerful way of expressing their Christian faith. Process thought is about a worldview that is relational, that's based on process and change, that recognizes that every proposition changes its force over time. I wonder whether what you're describing is sympathetic to what we call a process relational worldview? Or if you see that as very different. The motto for the Center for Process Studies is, "For the common good."

TJ: Yeah. I think what I would really like is, I would like those pastors you're talking about to come out of the closet, because I find very few pastors, or even theologians in the

I would like those pastors you're talking about to come out of the closet, because I find very few pastors, or even theologians in the circles I travel, willing to publicly say, "I'm a process person; process theology is where it's at for me."

circles I travel, willing to publicly say, “I’m a process person; process theology is where it’s at for me.” I think there would be an affinity. There are a lot of people who’ve read John Cobb. I mean, we read some John Cobb at Fuller, right? But process theology was outflanked PR-wise, and so it became kind of a dirty word, the way “liberal” has become a dirty word in politics now. So it would be nice to either reclaim that, or reframe it—maybe not use that terminology anymore, but reframe it as, “We’re the relational theology people, and

here’s why; here’s what we think about God’s relationship to history, which is unlike what you’re hearing in other versions of Christian theology about God’s relationship with history and how that is reflective of the Trinitarian relationship.”

PC: You’d like to see a more robust process voice?

TJ: Yes, in theological circles and in the American church in general; yeah, for sure.

PC: Beautiful. Hey, thanks for talking with us.

TJ: My pleasure.

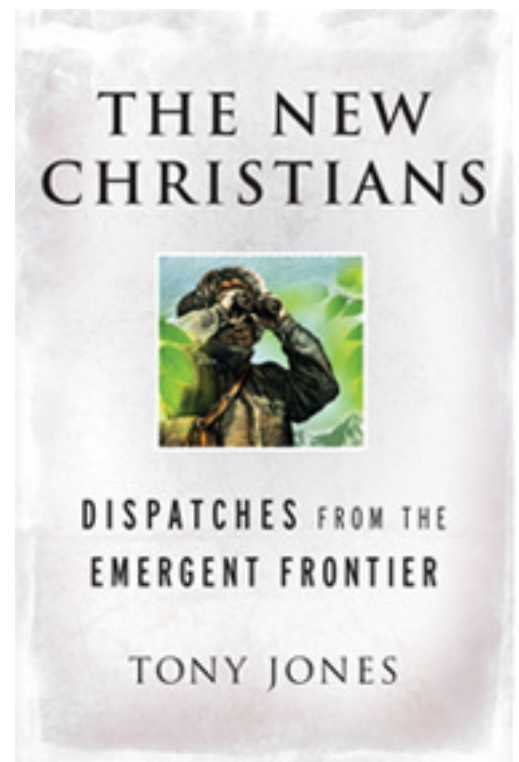
Tony Jones is the author of The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier and is theologian-in-residence at Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis. He is the author of many books on Christian ministry and spirituality and is a sought after speaker and consultant in the areas of emerging church, postmodernism, and Christian spirituality. Tony has three children and lives in Edina, Minnesota.

Reviews of Tony Jones’ *The New Christians*

“ Jones provides the single best introduction to the Emergent Church movement, of which he is a prominent leader. The mainline denominations are dying, and the hyperindividualism of evangelicalism is unsatisfying, so many young evangelicals, Jones explains, have decided to recreate church for postmodern times. Jones credits Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* with raising important questions about sounding the Gospel in an era beset by questions about foundationalism, epistemology and how to read Scripture. He passionately defends the emergent movement from criticism. In particular, critics are wrong to claim that emergents don’t

really believe in the Bible; emergents passionately love the Bible, says Jones, but also know that finite human beings cannot definitively articulate truth. The strongest sections put flesh on these theoretical bones by taking readers into actual emergent churches, like Jacob’s Well in Kansas City, Mo., where the pastor draws on Catholic practice, engages the visual arts and sees the church’s job as assisting people on their pilgrimage of faith.”

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“This intelligent and informative book is the only insider story from one of the leading lights of the more progressive wing of the emerging movement.” ~*Christianity Today* (October 2009)



The theologies we need for transformation

by THOMAS J. OORD

Theology shouldn't play a supporting role in the Christian transformation we need desperately today. It should play the main role!

At least that's my conviction after recently reading *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church in Society*, by Philip Clayton (in collaboration with Tripp Fuller). The book argues that engaging and constructing theology is the missing piece in current efforts for fostering Christian renewal.

We all know the world is different today. This difference should influence at least somewhat the theology we affirm in our postmodern world. Clayton says that he wrote the book in part because so many people have "lost the ability to give powerful, vibrant accounts of what it means to be 'Christian' in today's world and what it is they actually believe" (6).

Process theology is leading the way in helping us think best about and relate to God and others.

Telling our Stories

Testimony is an essential part of the Christian transformation we need today, says Clayton. "We have to learn to tell our story, as individuals and as communities," he says, "together with Jesus' story."

Formulating theologies involves creating a powerful statement of what we believe. This statement can guide and motivate the transformative action God seeks in us and in the world.

Telling our own stories also lifts our implicit beliefs about God into consciousness, says Clayton. Doing so helps us become explicit about the beliefs we affirm. This process also makes it possible for us to compare our beliefs with other ways of thinking about God. And this comparison, in turn, helps in our quest to affirm a more adequate theology.

A personal theological testimony doesn't require us to formulate a sophisticated theological treatise. "At the end of the day, don't you just have to work out the best answer you can give," Clayton asks rhetorically, "whether the others like it or not, and tell people honestly what you think?"

When we tell our own stories, we also need not think our story reduces theology itself. Christian theology is much greater than we are! But we cannot own our beliefs until we find our story in the grand Christian story.

Theological Leadership

Christian leadership plays a key role in the transformation God wants to accomplish. Leaders today have been given a rare opportunity to be catalysts for change.

Unfortunately, many Christians in leadership roles see a decline in church and denominational membership. Many in the highest echelons of Christian leadership determined that their denominations not collapse on their watch. I join Clayton and Fuller in urging denominational leaders

Leaders today have been given a rare opportunity to be catalysts for change.

to be out in front of change, rather than trying to manage change after the fact.

Christian leaders should think of themselves as hosting others, says Clayton, rather than controlling them. Good hosts build and maintain networks. And good leaders create positive links with other networks.

Networks Theology

While reading *Transforming Christian Leadership*, it occurred to me that perhaps what Christian leaders now need most is what I call “networks theology.” Such a theology would find common ground with others, while simultaneously voicing the distinctive features of our own faith story.

What I call networks theology, Clayton calls a “big tent” view of Christianity. This approach emphasizes the gospel of hope all Christians share. It deemphasizes without denying the historical differences that have divided Christians over the centuries.

Clayton rightly observes that some people today claim not to identify with a particular theological tradition. Many claim to be spiritual but not religious. They distrust institutions and traditions. Yet these same people often end together in new communities of like-minded people.

Part of a leader’s ministry today is to deal effectively and appreciatively with this anti-religious institution phenomenon. I think the idea of networks can be a great tool for this kind of pluralistic theological engagement.

As important as institutions can be, they are not what motivate people to seek transformation. Genuine transformation requires stoking the fires that fuel the passions of many who seek change.

“The kingdom of God would be a lot better off,” says Clayton, “if people went hunting for the kinds of conversations and actions that brought the sparkle of excitement to their eyes.” I certainly agree. And it’s no small credit to process theology that it brings sparkles of excitement to the eyes of many.

I don’t think every theology is of the same value. Some theological visions are better than others. But a variety of theologies can foster creative transformation today.

We don’t have to agree with one another on all issues of importance to be part of a network of theologies. A big tent of diverse theologies is possible. Only those who think they know all theological truth inerrantly might feel obliged to exclude themselves.

Theologies of Transformation

After reading Clayton’s book and others, I’ve come to think that I can contribute to the current theological conversation. Perhaps I can work to identify the kinds of theologies that foster transformation.

Here is my first attempt at a list of theologies of transformation.

Perhaps one could construct a “meta-theology” to account for this list. But for now, I focus upon six types of theology that seem important for emphasis:

- Theologies acknowledging brokenness and experiencing healing
- Theologies helping us deeply experience and affirm God’s relentless love for others and us
- Theologies that advocate triumph over addictions
- Theologies that foster creative/artistic expression
- Theologies urging passion for social justice, activism, and compassion for the poor
- Theologies of personal spiritual formation

Placing theology at the center of a movement seeking transformation keeps the focus where it belongs: on God. This focus must remain on God, not because it sounds pious to do so. It must remain on God, because other motivations cannot sustain our passion and compassion.

Robust theologies of transformation must speak about our decisions and action. But I’m convinced theologies focused primarily upon creatures undermine cravings for transformation. Only God can satisfy as our ultimate concern.

Oord, continued on page 32

This focus must remain on God, not because it sounds pious to do so. It must remain on God, because all other motivations cannot sustain our passion and compassion.

This is where POWER lies

by L. CALLID KEEFE-PERRY

The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively . . . A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. ~Alfred North Whitehead, Aims of Education, 1929

[My plea for a new theopoetic] means according a greater role to the imagination in all aspects of the religious life . . . Imagination is a necessary component of all profound knowing and celebration; all remembering, realizing, and anticipating; all faith, hope, and love. When imagination fails doctrines become ossified, witness and proclamation wooden, doxologies and litanies empty, consolations hollow, and ethics legalistic. ~ Amos Wilder, Theopoetic, 1979



It seems likely that Whitehead would declare that many of our nation's seminaries have no reason for existence and that Wilder would suggest the majority of our systems of theological education are ossified and empty. This is unfortunate. To this, Phillip Clayton adds his own voice, writing confessionally in *Transforming Christian*

Theology that, "I can no longer publish theology books that are written primarily for specialists. From now on I must write for a broader audience, one that includes ordinary people who are eager to speak clearly and passionately about their faith—and those who are struggling to find out exactly what in the Christian story they really do care passionately about." I hear Clayton's invigorating movement toward individual reclamation of expression and passion as an example of growth that would be more fully satisfying to both Whitehead and Wilder. My intent in this article is to offer the readers of *Creative Transformation* another lens beyond that of process thought with which to consider Clayton's call to transformation and the larger work of this great turning within Christianity: an understanding and cultivation of theopoetic perspectives may provide another means to creatively engage and revitalize our continuing explorations of God and Church.

The term theopoetics was first used by [Stanley Romaine Hopper](#) in the early 1970s, rising out of conversations that had been taking place within the Society for Art and Religion in Contemporary Culture and the American Academy of Religion. At that time, Hopper wrote with feeling that some new means of articulating our faith must

be found, or the whole of the theological project would collapse under the weight of its own methodologically anachronistic Greek constructs. During the speech which first saw the term theopoetics used, Hopper commented that “it is not even a question as to whether we can come up with a theology ‘in a new key’; it is a question rather as to whether theology, insofar as it retains methodological fealty to traditional modes, is any longer viable at all.” If theology was to remain viable, thought Hopper, it would need to become a theopoetic: a way of expressing knowledge of the Divine that was more sensitive to individual experience, more aware of the power of narrative and metaphor, and cognizant of the limitations of propositional logic to inform our faith life. In Hopper’s words, the shift to a new voice would acknowledge that our “theologies belong to the realm of mytho-poetic utterance and that theo-logos is not theo-logic but theo-poiesis.” Since Hopper, a score or so of thinkers have taken up consideration and publication regarding theopoetics, and they, in turn, have led me to consider the implications that a theopoetic perspective brings to bear on my faith and calling to minister.

Whereas both Hopper and Wilder, the earliest proponents of the idea, conceived of “theopoetic” as a concrete noun used to describe specific texts that evoked resonances of the Divine, I have been more powerfully drawn to the word as an adverb. How do we go about living our lives more theopoetically, learning how to perceive our daily lives as parts of the grand dance to which God provides the melody? How does our expression of the Divine change our experience of the Divine? For those of us serving in the ministry, these questions takes on even greater depth when we consider its implications not only for ourselves, but for those that we serve and work beside. How can we help and encourage the “ordinary people who are eager to speak clearly and passionately about their faith,” to do so, and to do it in a manner that engenders a further deepening of their relationship with the Divine and their engagement with others in matters of justice, righteousness, and liberation? This question, so close to Clayton’s strident self-appeal for renewal, seems equally tied to Whitehead’s “atmosphere of excitement,

arising from imaginative consideration” and Wilder’s plea for the reprioritization of the creative act within theological discourse.

When Amos Wilder wrote the 1976 book, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination*, he not only expanded on Hopper’s articulation of what would constitute a theopoetic, he also reframed and pushed the edges of what he saw as necessary for enlivening Christian service. Far from conceiving of ministry as merely performative, the theopoetic perspective suggests that ministerial work is most powerfully enacted when it also serves as means of recalibrating the models, metaphors, and stories by which we make sense of the world. What is being called for is not a performance, or a proposition, but a facilitation, an easy-making so that others can come to more fully see how it is that God is continually revealed not only in Scripture, but in the minute particulars of the world.

As ministers it is our task to enact liturgy in the worshipping community *and* engender the shift in perspective needed for individuals to more regularly see themselves as part of the Divine call. Wilder’s plea for a theopoetic approach to religious thought is a request to consider how we might envision the ministerial vocation as simultaneously more poetic and encouraging. We must move from gatekeeping, clerical mentalities towards prophetically energizing ones which not only instruct, but also inspire people to more fully engage with the Divine in their lives. Just as a fine piece of literature

The theopoetic perspective suggests that ministerial work is most powerfully enacted when it also serves as means of recalibrating the models, metaphors, and stories by which we make sense of the world.

can be returned to repeatedly with varied meanings found at varying times, so too can we reexamine the direction, arc, and nature of our own stories, finding ever changing ways in which God draws us forth into the world.

Following this approach, texts like Malachi 2:7 take on a different timbre: “for the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth.” “Guard” here is *shaamar*, the same word used as “keep” in Genesis 2:15 when “the Lord God took the man

and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” Whereas more authoritarian readings of the Malachi text would suggest that the task of the holy servant is to dole out knowledge to seekers in measured amounts when appropriate,

If we seek to radically renew and transform Christian theology, we will need not only new systematics, but new songs, new stories, and new sight, each grounded in the liberating power of Christ’s message.

the theopoetic interpretation here would have us be more along the lines of keeping the Garden: we must tend to our knowledge, allow it to grow and flower and bear us fruit. We must make sure the light of day reaches it regularly and that it has air and water to take in and make into new life. We want the knowledge to grow, want our relationship with the Divine to be ever deepening and sending forth pale shoots that may one day support works of mercy and acceptance of grace.

For the Church and our congregations to survive and thrive, we must find ways to nurture each other in a such a manner that the inspiration and integrity of the Gospel is maintained *and* encouragement is given to all men and women eager to explore and express their relationship with God. Their voices will not all sound alike and neither will their cadences, emphases, or conclusions, but if Tony Jones is correct in *Transforming Christian Theology’s* Foreward, and, “the salvation of progressive Christianity will be populist theology,” then it is essential that we begin to encourage all sorts of people to speak out and to develop discerning ears which can listen in tongues, seeking to hear that of God in each other’s voice. The resulting dialogue will be all the more rich for its diversity in language, articulation, and particularity.

While my understanding of process thought suggests that it tends to argue for models on the basis of their ability to be “consistent, coherent, applicable, and adequate,” and functions as a broad basis of support rather than as means

to produce contextualized praxis, I do feel as if there is room for a theopoetic approach at the table. When new voices, expressions, and interpretations begin to explore uncharted models and articulations, it is important that they be given acknowledgement on their particular merit, not just as some example of a generality. Knowledge of poetics may grant the reader of a poem some sense of it within the context of the art, helping to develop a greater appreciation, but it will always be the case that the compelling component of a line is not due to its austere relationship to an abstracted set of historical poetic guidelines, but the degree to which it captures some fragment of beauty and truth in the present.

If we seek to radically renew and transform Christian theology, we will need not only new systematics, but new songs, new stories, and new sight, each grounded in the liberating power of Christ’s message, and each a reminder of Wilder’s assertion that “human societies are more deeply motivated by images and fabulations than by ideas. This is where power lies and the future is shaped.” I do believe that Christian theology can transform as Philip Clayton thinks it can, but its transformation won’t come from the same old players. As clergy and lay ministers it is my hope that we can be part of this shaping of the future by encouraging others to shape it, that we can help to engender an atmosphere of passionate excitement, and that the Christianity which emerges from such passion will be nourishing, many-voiced, and in ever-deepening service. I pray we all find ways to take part in this, for God is indeed the poet of the world, and the poem of the days in which we live is beautiful and true.

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Ministers of CULTURE

by JAMES PARKER

Between its release on December 18, 2009 and January 20, 2010, *Avatar* has grossed over \$509 million from domestic ticket sales (\$54 million of that coming from just one weekend a month after its release). Even now, viewers continue to comment on Facebook and Twitter at how surprised they are to see the theaters still packed. Add to this foreign box office returns, and *Avatar* has already surpassed the \$1.6 billion mark. At an average of \$14 per ticket, over 115.7 million people have seen this film (over 36 million in the US alone).¹

American Idol's ninth season premiere drew 29.8 million viewers, only a slight decrease from last year's performance. However, it experienced an increase in viewers between the ages of 18 and 49.² Even if people do not watch the talent series, the ubiquity of social media keeps them well-informed whether they want to be or not as viewers reference particular performances or post videos of them to their Twitter updates or Facebook pages.

November 10, 2009, saw the release of the sixth *Call of Duty* video game, *Modern Warfare 2*. Over 4.7 million copies flew off the shelves in the U.S. and U.K. in 24 hours, generating around \$310 million in revenue.³ The online network currently boasts 8 million participants and is growing daily. This is a larger "force" than all the militaries of the 28 NATO countries combined, China's army, and the combined American military forces.⁴

Despite a struggling economy, pop culture continues to thrive.

Over the past several months, numerous theologians, professors, ministers, and laity have lamented the declining influence and relevance of denominations. Some have even pronounced them dead . . . or at least having one

foot in the grave. Their explanations for their increasing irrelevance are too numerous to list here and have been articulated brilliantly elsewhere. One of the reasons that both denominations and their component congregations are in danger is their inability to effectively engage the 18-40 year-old age group. Why are these individuals leaving traditional denominations and congregations in droves? I suggest it is because these institutions, to a large degree, have failed to meet people where they are . . . immersed in pop culture. As such, I propose that denominations and congregations consider embracing and equipping pop culture ministers.

In his recent article, "Theology After Google," Philip Clayton laments one shortcoming of denominations today. He writes, "[In] most cases, it's the denominations that determine how pastors are educated, what kinds of ministries they can engage in, and what kinds of church

Couldn't we also encourage congregants to link their experiences of pop culture with serious theological reflection?

assignments they get." Clayton then writes about the negative effects of seminary on a young students' idealism (and creativity). Fresh graduates are suddenly thrust into rapidly decaying churches and commanded to save them.⁵ Rarely are seminarians encouraged to delve deeply into pop culture or educated to uncover the ways in which film and television (for example) convey meaning and values that are reflective of the culture at large. In their book, *Transforming Christian Theology for Church and Society*, Clayton and Tripp Fuller rightly argue for the necessity of congregations to link their service with serious theological

reflection. Couldn't we also encourage congregants to link their experiences of pop culture with serious theological reflection? Unfortunately, to this point, most faith communities have either been too critical of pop culture or too accepting. Although I would imagine that our denominational assumptions of which does which would be surprisingly inaccurate. In fact, most members of conservative denominations are more likely to buck any denominational approach to the matter and embrace some elements of pop culture.⁶

Before I continue, however, I want to say that I do not mean to imply that all denominations or congregations are completely out of touch with pop culture. Increasingly, local churches offer faith and film discussion series. Pastors frequently season sermons

with references to films or television programs or even employ film clips during worship services. These are

How effective could a children's curriculum be, built around Pixar films?

all good things, but they are also just the tip of the iceberg. Could we not envision a deeper, more consistent engagement with pop culture at all levels of denominational life from seminary to Sunday morning?

One place to start would be to challenge ministers of pop culture to create curriculum around pop culture. This curriculum building must be conversational in nature as the minister brings

the best of her theological tradition to bear on pop culture and the best (and maybe even worst) that pop culture offers to critique the weaknesses and shortcomings of that same theological tradition. For example, how effective could a children's curriculum be, built around Pixar films? Such material could be shared across congregational lines and denominational boundaries via online communities and social networks, which pose both challenges and opportunities to denominations today. Such cooperation would mirror Chris Copeland's call for denominations to mirror marketplaces rather than grocery stores.⁷

This example illustrates theological consumption of and engagement with popular culture, yet it is also theologically productive for the community of faith from which it emerges and

Preaching Dorothy: A Sermon Arc Based on *The Wizard of Oz*

by PAUL LANCE

Some years back, I preached a series of sermons on the characters of L. Frank Baum's 1889 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, highlighting process-relational themes. More people now know the 1936 movie musical starring Judy Garland than have read the book, but it is probably the quintessential American fable. I wrote a new script which was performed by a dozen of my church children and youth, to include some "backstory."

The opening scene, for example, provided a glimpse of Munchkin oppression by the Wicked Witch of the East prior to her accidental death at the hand of Dorothy's house. I named her "Malinda" (in contrast to the good witch

"Glinda") and made her very big and fat. Her self-centered consumption, enormous size, and reliance on coercive power (her silver shoes) are what made Malinda wicked. Her twin sister in the West used her telescopic eye (omniscience) and omnipotent hat, combined with deceit ("promises are just words useful for a time to achieve a purpose, then they grow stale and you need to let them go" she tells Dorothy), to manipulate her part of Ozland. In contrast, Dorothy relies on truth and vulnerability, relationships with strangers and persuasion to make her way in the world.

A second scene provided backstory to Dorothy's life—memories of her deceased mother and life in the electric

hopefully the wider world into which it is distributed. But this is second-tier production—material that reflects on an already extant source. Perhaps another role for pop culture ministers would be to produce the media itself. What if communities of faith not only engaged films, for example, but produced them as well? The pop culture minister then becomes a producer, in the cinematic sense, organizing the artistic talent in her community to work together. The most obvious example of this at work today is [Sherwood Pictures](#), a filmmaking ministry branch of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. Another example of media creation is Spencer Burke's [The OozeTV](#), a website with short episodes in which Spencer interviews popular theologians, ministers, activists, and others. Sherwood Pictures and The Ooze might be theologically different,

but the technological reality of the world in which we live makes it easy for a variety of communities to broadcast themselves.

Yet technology and pop culture ministers can be utilized for more personal endeavors as well. Based on the work of documentary filmmaker [Macky Alston](#), ministers might encourage filmmaking as spiritual practice.⁸ Alston claims that filmmaking involves seeing people in their vulnerability and seeing people that no one else sees . . . much like Jesus did. To know your neighbor, Alston argues, one has to see that neighbor. Documentary filmmaking offers this opportunity and enhances

this vision. With increasingly inexpensive equipment and software (all of which is increasingly user-friendly), even the most financially strapped denomination or congregation can engage this practice of seeing.

In reflecting on Clayton's "Theology After Google," I realize that my desire for the emergence of pop culture ministers embodies his five theses. It

Perhaps another role for pop culture ministers would be to produce the media itself.

is productive, non-institutional, decentralized, "host-oriented," and transcends the sacred/secular divide. This last feature is especially important because pop culture is often cast in a negative, secular light. I appreciate

city before coming, as an orphan, to live in dry, dustbowl, rural Kansas. Her yearning for someplace more lively and green, with friends to play with and interesting things to do, was off-putting to Aunt Em and grumpy Uncle Henry, who wanted Dorothy to settle down and appreciate the heartland values of their hardworking home life.

The whirlwind that ripped Dorothy out of Kansas with Toto (whose name in Latin means "everything" because her dog was all she had left from her earlier life), though uncontrolled and dangerous, freed her to follow a novel path in life, made up of one "yellow brick" of experience at a time, one chance encounter after another, with an odd cast of strangers. She is the real hero.

In Baum's novel, the Scarecrow represents not only the need for "brains," but the way urban society tended to look down upon the "uneducated" farmers—even though their common sense often saved the day. The Tin Woods-

man (who is the only character who carried a weapon) represented the newly industrialized society which was becoming dehumanized (he had no "heart").

The social critique inherent in Baum's original was downplayed by Hollywood in the movie musical. They invented a rainbow at the outset, a flourishing family farm, and a climactic punch line: "There's no place like home." When Dorothy awakes in black and white, she realizes it was all a dream. In the book, Aunt Em has been grieving the loss of Dorothy presumed dead. The movie was terribly successful as America was coming out of the Great Depression and gearing up for a second world war and needed a happily-ever-after magical moment. The reality of a displaced child in a changing society, growing up into self-sufficient young adulthood, is the more important aspect of the story, in my opinion. That's why I spent a half-dozen sermons on it.

the view that Barry Taylor articulated in a recent Homebrewed Christianity podcast in which he rejected the sacred/secular divide.⁹ He argued that, in terms of popular culture, creativity itself is pregnant with spiritual and theological implications. Said another way, I would argue that theological and spiritual conversations are al-



ways already taking place around us, and to somehow “ghettoize” them and keep them separate from our “official” theologies is to damn both the practice of theology and the life of the worshipping church. It would be fascinating to see what percentage of the pop culture participants I highlighted above participates in a community of faith. I imagine it is small. Smaller still, perhaps, is the number of participants who have or are encouraged to make the connections between the two.

The assertions emerging from the Transforming Theology conferences to encourage theologizing on the part of the laity is exciting indeed. We truly are all theologians, just as we are all ministers of God. I propose that communities of faith embrace this egalitarian approach with seriousness and enthusiasm but that they do so with a deep consideration of and for pop culture theology and ministers of pop culture. The figures listed at

the beginning of this article should suffice to convey pop culture’s relevance. However, I could also point to countless films, books, songs, and television programs that make just as, or more, significant contributions to fruitful discussions of theological issues than denominations or many of their component congregations. Pop culture has now assumed what once belonged to Christianity, the role of dominant culture. Yet pop culture still addresses deeply theological issues. One needn’t look far into the pop culture matrix to find issues of redemption, love, forgiveness, acceptance, sin, violence, and more.

Pop culture ministers will be vital to the health and vitality of both denominations and local congregations because they meet a great portion of the population where they already are. Moreover, if these ministers happen to have experience in film or media studies (for example), they can unmask the “isms” that plague both popular culture and, to an extent, the faith communities in which we live. In doing so, these communities of faith begin to “speak, act, and *be* a theological community that testifies to and participates in the kingdom of God within the world in which people live,” even if that world is on the silver, small, or video game screen.¹⁰

Notes

1. [Avatar box office figures](#) available from: [boxofficejo.com](#) (accessed 01/20/2010).
2. Lynn Elber, “[‘American Idol’ ratings strong without Paula Abdul](#),” Associated Press, January 13, 2010 (accessed 01/20/2010).

3. Ben Silverman, “[‘Modern Warfare 2’ breaks day-one entertainment sales record](#),” Yahoo! Games, November 12, 2009 (accessed 01/20/2010).

4. Owen Good, “[Modern Warfare 2’s Army is 26,000 Times Larger Than Sparta’s](#),” Kotaku, December 4, 2009 (accessed 01/20/2010).

5. Philip Clayton, “[Theology After Google](#),” The Ooze.com, January 19, 2010 (accessed 01/20/2010).

6. In an interview with Sharon Waxman, Joseph Helfgat, president of MarketCast, revealed that people with conservative religious doctrine are the most likely to see movies rated R for violence. Compared to liberals, it’s a third more. Waxman, “[Hollywood’s Newfound Passion for Christ](#),” International Herald Tribune, July 20, 2005 (accessed 05/10/2009).

**Pop culture has
now assumed what
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dominant culture.**

7. Chris Copeland, “[From Supermarket to Farmers’ Market: Denominations in a Post-Denominational World](#),” Alliance of Baptists Blog, February 28, 2009 (accessed 01/20/2010).

8. Visit [here](#) to find some of Alston’s examples of filmmaking as ministry.

9. Podcast available from [Homebrewed Christianity](#) (accessed 01/20/2010).

10. Tripp Fuller, email to the author, January 18, 2010. Thanks to Tripp for his comments that helped shape this article.

Process from My Perspective

Process theology, worship, and theater

by CHRIS KLIESEN WEHRMAN

Editor's Note: This presentation was written for a group of adult theater artists who are worship leaders and have various levels of theater experience and skill. A significant portion of them also has improvisational experience.

As many of you know I am about to graduate (God-willin' and the creek don't rise) from seminary. It is a liberal, interdenominational seminary, which means (*Cliff Notes* version) that there is an emphasis on social justice issues, on "Relevant Religion"—religion that really intersects with the way people live every day—and on inclusivity. We have conversations about how Christians can be in conversation with other spiritual ways—wait, make that respectful, even eager conversation. We place an emphasis on inviting *everybody* to the table that is laid at the center of our faith. "All means all," we say, and we mean it. We invest by practice and by mandate in using language carefully so that, by our very speaking, we are shaping the mind of a future that becomes ever more just, more inclusive, more relevant for the world we so passionately believe can live into the *Basilea* (what we used to call the Kingdom of God, before that language was recognized as elevating an image of a dominant, male God).

So, on a day not long enough ago I am sitting in a class about enriching the musical life of congregations, a summer Arts and Theology Workshop intended to refresh spiritual leaders, and the professor begins to talk about praise bands. "*They*," he says with a sneer, "are missing the point. *They* do not participate in worship for the glory

I know in my bones that it is my song, my dance, my story that, when given space at the front of the sanctuary, opens a window through which God's people feel the breath of Spirit blow like a breeze—or sometimes a cyclone.

of God, but rather *perform* (he says this as though it is a dirty word) for *their own pleasure* (dirtier yet)." I am thinking that perhaps the anger that begins to boil somewhere in the vicinity of my kneecaps is simple defensiveness. I do, after all, sing in a (heaven forbid) praise band and, gulp, I enjoy it. But as the conversation continues, the anger rises. A woman tells the story of scolding her "cherub choir"—little girls dressed in angel wings and ready to sing on

Christmas Eve—for admiring themselves as they glitter and glow backstage (oh, goodness, I mean, in the sacristy), "Stop that! This is not a performance. This is for God." How to be reasonable as I raise my hand to speak? "Do you realize what you are saying?" I have to ask, "How can you say such exclusive and hurtful things?" And I went on to explain something that many of you know. Even among Christian folk who pride themselves on radical inclusion and hospitality, who stand against all the "isms" (racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism . . . the never ending list), it is common to speak negatively of artists in church: To question their intentions; to accuse them of inordinate vanity and attention seeking; to denigrate their bliss; to treat them as if their disciplines produce nothing more than the frothy, self-indulgent equivalent of the chemical goop that looks like whipped cream on top of a party cupcake. And I say, "It's me you are talking about. Look at me. Me. It is my passion you are questioning; my life work that you are relegating to the back pew; my wisdom you are discarding. And even as you do so, I know in my bones that it is my song, my dance, my story that, when given space at the front of the sanctuary, opens a window

through which God's people feel the breath of Spirit blow like a breeze—or sometimes a cyclone. You cannot be who you say you are (inclusive) and continue to exclude artists from the table with your dismissive language and derisive misconceptions."

Well (that's a deep subject, we used to say), there was a deep silence. And then one woman said, "Thank you." Bless her heart she was an artist, too, although at that time she was unwilling to claim the label. Today I want to tell you that it can be a holy thing to claim the label; that I believe the salvation of the world depends on us, and that I have at last found a vocabulary—recognized as a legitimate theological/spiritual point of view—that we can cling to as we describe and experience and become more intentional about how we as artists can be particularly and specifically aware of the presence of God in the world. It is called process theology.

They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and I may prove that here today. But I'm willing to take the risk. My knowledge of process theology is fresh: I have read five books (and used another as reference); I have attended twelve lectures and participated in the consequent discussions. I have poked around on websites and laid awake in my bed arranging and re-arranging concepts in my mind. My professor has coaxed me toward confidence with positive feedback on two simple written assignments. And that is all. Still, I feel as though a lifetime of experiencing has come rejoicing to this learning and I am impatient to share what I understand with you. So, I will give you the bibliography of all that

I have read at the close of our time together, and offer to lend you books with recommended chapters. With that, let us begin.

The specific process theology I will

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speak of today is based on the philosophy, or metaphysics, of Alfred North Whitehead, brought into the world of Christian theology by John B. Cobb, Jr. and taught to me by Jeanyne Slettom, a colleague of Dr. Cobb's at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, CA. Without getting too bogged down in why I say all this, I simply want you to be aware that I am describing a very particular system of thought. And it helps to begin with a little information about these three people.

Alfred North Whitehead was an English mathematician turned philosopher who lived in the last half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries

(from 1861 to 1947). He lived in a time when the basic perceptions of reality were dualistic, meaning largely centered on a series of dichotomies or contrasting pairs. This is an ancient and inherited system of thought given weight and credence by an era that revered science as the most viable way of knowing. It sounds heavy, but it's quite recognizable. Think of dark and light, good and bad, God and the world; mind and body. When we divide things into dualistic pairs we set them in comparison to one another and assign greater value to one than the other. Light is "better" than dark. God is "better" than the world. Mind is "better" than body. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking comes with a destructive price tag. Here are questions for you to answer aloud: [interactive] When is darkness good? When is light not? How does making God better than the world determine the way we care for the planet? Who suffers when we make mental principles more important than those things that sustain physical life? It doesn't take us long to begin to feel that dualistic thinking prevents us from embracing the whole of reality in a sustainable manner. We see it in the world around us, in which we continually create and perpetuate systems that disenfranchise the "lesser" of any set of contrasts. Think of dark and light leading to black and white leading to African American and Euro American leading to which schools in which neighborhoods get the most money for textbooks. Which is exalted? Which is disenfranchised? Whitehead set about to formulate a metaphysic—a description of reality—that makes it possible to understand being in a different

way. He sought to find some kind of overarching unity that could somehow embrace dichotomies and recognize the necessity of each in relationship to the other and the rest of being. He did this by delving fearlessly into all scientific knowledge available to him and by observing his own experience of being. It led him to a philosophy rich with relationship, energy, potential for newness and even mystery—an aspect which he called, even in his non-religious system, God.

John B. Cobb, Jr. became convinced by the power and truth in Whitehead's metaphysic and formulated what he called a Christian natural theology along the same lines. John Cobb was born in 1925 and raised in Japan, the son of United Methodist missionaries, in a Buddhist culture. You can imagine that experiencing the world every day from the point of view of a Christian household in the midst of Buddhist culture, and as an American in a world of Japanese citizens, must have produced in this child an appreciation for contrasts. Reality is richer when diversity is present. How then, can contrast be bad? And if contrast is to be welcomed, and both elements of any pair are necessary for that contrast to exist, how can we degrade one half of the dichotomy? Everything is intrinsically necessary and part of an overarching unity that John Cobb—humble and devout from an early age—was more than willing to name “God.” Furthermore, Cobb lives in a postmodern world where systems of thought are much more likely to embrace an array of possibilities than to force a choice of one possibility to the exclusion and degradation of all others. The theology he formulated—and



Detail of community-created communion cloth, Robbinsdale United Church of Christ. Guided by Dawn Carlson Conn. Poem by Chris Kleisen Wehrman

is yet formulating—not only allows, but demands that mind and matter both have actual and important reality. That their relationship to each other is woven into the fabric of reality, in fact weaves the fabric of reality. God has actual existence in the world; the past is present in the future. Reality is dynamic—alive and changing, responsive and filled with constantly unfolding choices and possibilities. When you think back to the questions

we answered just a few minutes ago it is clear what is at stake here. We, the human inhabitants of this planet, are in a precarious situation. Our dualistic way of thinking has produced and is sustaining patterns that are destroying our one and only habitat. As Christians, Cobb is convinced; our calling is nothing less than to save the world.

One more figure: Jeanyne Slettom, my professor. Professor as in, “one who

professes.” What I know about process theology has been gleaned from books she selected, lectures she gave, conversations we had in class, and much of the way it landed for me has to do with the spirit with which she teaches. She has learned the Good News in this theology and has carried it to me—and so many others—often referencing the website recommended in the bibliography I will hand each of you as we finish. What I want to point out is this. Evidently, people say that process theology is difficult to understand or at least difficult to share. There are those who say, “Fine, good, nice theory, but no way can you really use this stuff. You can’t preach it, pray it, teach it, or use it to govern your churches.” Not so. And this I know to be true, because Jeanyne taught me, and we all wrote prayers and sermons and are now seeking to pass on the Good News that we can actually be in process in our lives and in our churches and it will make a difference. We can have this conversation with a Bible in one hand and an iPhone in the other (to google with). It will matter. We will bring our souls and our bodies, our hearts and our minds, our love of humanity and of the planet, our devotion to God and our passion for our art with us. There is a place for us—for us artists—for us *theater* artists in this theology, and I believe we can experience a kind of homecoming under its ever-opening umbrella. We, who are cultivators of imagination, students of the power of choices, devotees of the importance of relationship, improvisers of life itself to the extent of both bliss and mourning, are needed here.

So, as Maria sings in *The Sound of Music*, “Let’s start at the very beginning . . . When you read you begin with A, B, C. When you sing you begin with Do, Re, Mi.” When you do process theology you begin with a “moment” called an actual occasion. It’s called an actual occasion because it is actual—real – it’s the smallest unit of reality that we can talk about. And it’s called an occasion because it happens; it’s an event that has energy, potential, exuberance; movement. For our purposes, we’ll call it a moment. Moments occupy time differently than we usually mean when we use a “chrono word” (one that refers to time), but it will do, especially as we speak of what is simplest to understand—a nanosecond in the being of a human creature. Let’s take a

There is a place for us—for us artists—for us *theater* artists in this theology, and I believe we can experience a kind of homecoming under its ever-opening umbrella.

moment of being. What is it made of? Think of it as a tiny balloon. Into it pours all of the past—all the moments that have been: Jesus and the Beatitudes as well as what you had for breakfast. What you’ve thought, felt, done, and all the patterns of choices you’ve made show up. The balloon can hold it all, it is elastic. All of this pours in from the world. It’s made up of what we perceive through our senses and also what we do with what we perceive—the interplay between our mind and bodies. It’s also made up of inexplicable stuff

that comes to us by ways other than our senses or our intellect. Again, there is room for all of it in this elastic balloon of a moment. What do we make of all this?

Along with all this something else of great importance shows up. Call it possibility, or potential. Process theologians call it the initial aim. It comes into the moment from God. Direct from the primordial nature of God, that aspect of God that is the source of all possibilities. Think of it as the first and best idea God has for the best and fullest possibility in the moment. We’ll simply call it the Idea (with a capital “I” for God). The Idea arrives in a real moment, so it arrives appropriate to the moment (i.e., the Idea doesn’t show up at the beach wearing a parka; it is suited to the context of the moment—it is *relevant* and that’s important). The balloon expands. Now, if we look closely at the Idea, it looks a bit like a raspberry, a fruit made up of a whole lot of little seeds to choose from. It is unlike a raspberry, however, because in a raspberry every seed is like the other. In the Idea choices have range. They are more or less in line with the best and fullest possibility God brings to the moment. Maybe it’s like a buffet: we can choose to go to the salad bar or the dessert bar and one is going to match the goal of our meal more perfectly than the other. The choice we make will influence our next set of choices. At the salad bar we will not find chocolate cake, however, we will find broccoli. In other words, we are faced with a range of choices. So—to extend the metaphor a bit further than it ought to go—say that God’s best Idea for a celebratory meal, brought to us in this moment buffet-style, is chocolate cake, but we missed it when we chose broccoli. The choice of broccoli brings us to another moment and another set of choices.

But here's the key part: we choose. Call it free will, call it self-determination, but we choose.

Now let's circle back a bit. We make the choice based on the way we handle all of the stuff in the balloon. We "feel" or in process vocabulary, we "prehend" (sort of like "comprehend" without the emphasis on the total intellectual and finished character of that word), all of what is present in the moment and then we choose. "The power of the past is strong," a phrase you will hear often inside process conversations. We recognize its truth. But! There is another power here: The power of the Idea—of God—and of choice. This is the lure of creativity, the urge of possibility, the magnetism of newness, the nag of novelty. In any moment the direction of the past can change, and if it fails to do so, it will have another chance in the following moment! For you see, once the moment has completed itself, it sends forth itself as a piece of the past moving into a new moment of being, into which will flow another Idea. And the completed occasion, the moment that has chosen and moved on, is also now part of all that is, in this sense it is "received into" or "becomes part of" God. The phrase that describes it beautifully is this, "The many become one and are increased by one."

Let's stop for a moment to demonstrate this with an example from theater. Let's play a game of "Yes And."

In this game, played in pairs, one person articulates a piece

of information—"Here we are in the park." The next person must say, "YES, the park is where we are, AND my feet are getting wet." Then the response must be, "YES they are wet, AND that is because you are standing in the fountain." Do you see how each choice presents a new array of choices? Do you see how a surprising creative response is delightfully built into the play? It is clearly demonstrable.

One choice leads to another, and the more willingly we YES, the more possibilities exist for a relevant AND. In process theology this means that the more often we say the most willing YES to the Idea, the more possibilities spring up for energy-filled and relevant choices to come. This is nothing less than the radiance of God in the moment. This is incarnation. God is quite literally, actually, present in each and every moment. The more consistently and courageously we choose the Idea that is God, the more we align ourselves with the very nature of God as we live in the world. The results of our choices are reality itself—they become physically manifest in the world. Maybe just think of it as the consequences of choice having real being. So, the consequences of choice are alignment with God's best idea in and for the world—or not. What of the other choices, the ones that diminish possibility?

It is possible to make choices that introduce no novelty at all, that lead to fewer and duller possibilities. Let's play a game of "No But" to demonstrate. This game sets up exactly

About "Yes, And"

"Yes, And" is the cornerstone of improvisational technique. It is based in the work of [Viola Spolin](#), who established improv in America while working with immigrant populations. It is a staple of improv companies such as Dudley Riggs' Brave New Workshop (Minneapolis) and Paul Sills' (Viola's son) Second City (Chicago). Here is a basic description from Wikipedia:

"In order for an improvised scene to be successful, the improvisers involved must work together responsively to define the parameters and action of the scene, in a process of co-creation. With each spoken word or action in the scene, an improviser makes an offer, meaning that he or she defines some element of the reality of the scene. . . .

It is the responsibility of the other improvisers to accept the offers that their fellow performers make; to not do so is known as blocking, negation, or denial, which usually prevents the scene from developing. . . . Accepting an offer is usually accompanied by adding a new offer, often building on the earlier one; this is a process improvisers refer to as "Yes, And." Every new piece of information added helps the improvisers to refine their characters and progress the action of the scene."

I studied improv with both Dudley Riggs and Paul Sills. That's where I learned "Yes, And" as more than a performance technique—it is a way of being, as process theology also demonstrates.

the same as “Yes And,” except the rule is to deny and isolate. “Here we are in the park.” “NO we’re not in a park,

Okay, sure, we’ve got a sweet theology constructed here, but will it drive? Can we take it off road? Will it handle the rough stuff?

BUT we are in a hotel.” “NO we aren’t in a hotel, BUT I want a sandwich.” “NO you don’t want a sandwich, BUT I am a monkey.”

Oh, this is a frustrating game to play. It goes nowhere and it goes there fast. It establishes no relationship. It isolates each player completely from the partner. The novelty that arrives is completely irrelevant as one door after another slams shut. In process theology this is called diminishment or triviality, and it leads not to larger and larger sets of possibility but rather to narrowing possibilities, and a rejection of right relationship, ultimately to Whitehead’s definition of evil.

Now, it is important to remember that we are illustrating reality by speaking of moments of human being, but moments arrive for and in all forms of being—not just human creatures. Moments are as much the building blocks of reality in Whitehead’s philosophy and Cobb’s theology as the atom once was to Descartes or quarks are to a contemporary physicist. Still, for our purposes today, it is the nature of our relationship as human beings to God and to the world and all that is in it that begs our focus. “The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things, of shoes and ships and

sealing wax; of cabbages and kings” (from *The Walrus and the Carpenter* in Lewis Carroll’s *Through The Looking Glass*.) Or more to the point, let’s talk for a moment about God and free will and of Jesus and sin and salvation.

For us as Christians, this is where the rubber meets the road. Okay, sure, we’ve got a sweet theology constructed here, but will it drive? Can we take it off road? Will it handle the rough stuff? We’ve already talked about how God sends the Idea into each moment, and the more we realize that these moments belong to every form of being, not just the human ones, the more we realize that God is Everywhere and Always. Hallelujah! We’ve been saying that in church all along. Omnipresent, we call it. But there are other omni’s that don’t apply. Omniscient, for instance, means all knowing. If we truly have free will, if part of each moment is the present possibility of creative response, then it becomes possible to surprise, even to delight, God. If it makes you feel that God is diminished by denying God complete prior knowledge of the unfolding of the universe, remember when we began we talked about duality. Traditionally the stance has been God knows everything and we don’t. We have two qualities to catalogue, and one of them gets assigned to God

and the other to humans. The one that is God’s is better and the one that is human is lesser. But in process theology we have the chance to say, instead, that both God and humans can know and both God and humans can be surprised. God is still both transcendent—inclusive, everywhere and always—and imminent—incarnate in every moment. It is possible in this theology to take seriously the God that we read of in our scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, who responds to human predicaments. Who as Jehovah hears the “crying in the wilderness” and acts. Who as modeled in the life of Jesus, learns from the Syro-Phoenician woman and changes the course of his teaching. Process theology takes the Bible very seriously, and can set old words dancing in surprising rondolets.

And who is Jesus to God? My class has learned to talk of our understanding of Jesus in two ways: high or low Christology. A person with high Christology focuses on the divinity of Jesus. The idea that Jesus was and is really

Our class needed to find another category for Jesus in Cobb’s process theology: one student named it “wide Christology,” and it was a perfect choice.

and truly God, Godself, is of utmost importance to a person with high Christology. Stories of a virgin birth, healing miracles, and bodily resurrection are very important. To someone with a low Christology, on the other hand, what is of primary importance is that Jesus was human. Stories of his life, his teaching, his love, and his

suffering are important because they prove that God knows what it is to be one of us. Our class needed to find another category for Jesus in Cobb's process theology: one student named it "wide Christology," and it was a perfect choice. For Cobb, the way God was present in Jesus the human being is this: in the life of Jesus, he so consistently and habitually chose the Idea of God in every single moment, that the Idea became his very identity, creating a complete overlay of the perfect potential of God in every moment so that there was no difference between

the free will of Jesus and the Idea of God. This "potentiation" of God by Jesus can be called the Christ presence. We can see in Jesus what the possibilities of God's love look like in human form. This is a Jesus we can emulate. This Jesus is one that we can take with us into conversation with anyone on this planet—even those who believe steadfastly in other spiritual languages such as Buddhism and Islam. We can honestly enjoy—holding our own passionate investment in the Christ in Jesus—conversations with other faith traditions, because we can understand that the "Way" Jesus showed us is open to other ways. This understanding of Jesus, the embodied possibilities of love, this "wide Christology," delights in pluralism as an embodiment of the diverse choices in which God is present in the world.

So what of sin and salvation? If the Christ presence in a human being is exemplified by the constant choosing of God's Idea in every moment, lead-

ing to every widening possibility, the opposite can also be true. The constant choosing of the narrowest possibility will incrementally close down potential for relationship, for creativity, for fullness, for beauty and will lead to endless repetition and diminishment, again, to the point of perishing. Sounds a lot like the death Jesus promised us we don't have to die. Sounds a lot like sin. Yet, think of it, in each new mo-

We won't save the world by military force or triumph of will, or certainly by anything like the worship of materialism that is crushing us all. We will save it with imagination.

ment of being there is yet the potential for choosing the Idea. Every moment God is there and the offer is: choose Me! Choose relationship! Choose interdependence! Choose to create, surprise, engage, reawaken! Yes, And resurrection is present in every moment. Yes, And grace is present. Yes, And repentance, *metanoia*, the turning from one way to another, is present in every single moment of being. Can I get a hallelujah for that?

So if salvation is potential in every moment, how shall we arrive? We artists? We theater artists most particularly? Because salvation is not a private affair in this world of interconnected relationships. If God is indeed weaving the very fabric of being, if God is not simply observing or using us, but is continuing to create the world by offering us always a vision of our most potentiated selves to steer by, then we are indeed charged with saving the world. Whitehead himself presented God as an artist. He said, "[God] does

not create the world, [God] saves it; or, more accurately, [God] is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by [God's] vision of truth, beauty, and goodness" (*Process and Reality*, 346). We won't save the world by military force or triumph of will, or certainly by anything like the worship of materialism that is crushing us all. We will save it with imagination. We will remember our own future, the already, not yet-ness of the *Basilea*, and we will moment, by moment say, "Yes, And . . ." adding a unique and quirky and beautiful and irreplaceable bit of the realized Idea of God to all of being.

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Oord, continued from page 17

I also think we should emphasize God as Holy Spirit when thinking about transformational theology today. An emphasis upon the Holy Spirit fosters freshness, vitality, and power for change. Transformation requires this.

Of course, I don't mean to deemphasize the role of the other persons in the Trinity. We must also speak of the Father and Son. But how we typically think of the Holy Spirit ignites cries for and action to generate genuine transformation.

Love Theology

Finally, I can't imagine genuine transformation in the Christian tradition

without love at the fore. Above all, God is love. And the greatest commands center on love.

Part of what it means to keep love at the fore is that we must explain love takes a myriad of forms. Love is diversity friendly, although it does not affirm extreme relativism.

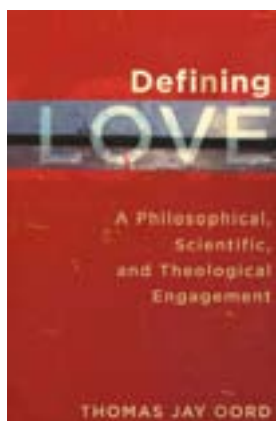
The emphasis upon love must be much more than talk. Talk is important. But actions often speak louder than words. Transformation requires love in action!

Of course, those familiar with process theology know that it can play a central role in encouraging the kinds of transformation we most need today.

They also probably know that a variety of process theologies exists.

Perhaps even this variety can become a resource for helping us respond well to God's lure of love toward creative transformation.

Thomas Jay Oord is author of the recently published books, The Nature of Love: A Theology and Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement, as well as a dozen other books. This article is adapted for CT readers from Oord's blog located at <http://thomasjayoord.com>.



Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement

by Thomas Jay Oord

Brazos Press, Paperback: \$29.99

“A splendid book that does more than any other to introduce the worlds of science and theology to a new field of integrative research and conceptualization that is giving agape a new centrality in our lives.” ~ Stephen G. Post, Institute for Research on Unlimited Love



The Nature of Love: A Theology

by Thomas Jay Oord

Chalice Press, Paperback: \$24.99

“Love is central to both Jesus and Paul. Yet instead of conforming all its teaching to the New Testament understanding of divine and human love, the theological tradition has limited the affirmation of love to what fits with other doctrines less directly derived from the Bible. For Oord it is time to reverse this pattern and to develop a truly biblical theology. Surely this should be acknowledged as a valid enterprise across the theological spectrum! But to do so would require a deep shift, a very desirable one, in the theological conversation.” ~ John B. Cobb, Jr.

God of Present, Past and Future

1. God of pres - ent, past and fu - ture, God of known, yet chang - ing ways;
 2. Grate - ful for the faith - ful vi - sion wo - men, men and chil - dren bore;
 3. For the stir of mind and spir - it, for the lure of God's de - light;
 4. In the halls of power and plen - ty, in the streets of want and need;
 5. As we jour - ney toward to - mor - row grant us grace to un - der - stand
 6. God of pre - sent, past and fu - ture, God of known and faith - ful ways;

We, your peo - ple stand be - fore you lift - ing up our thanks and praise.
 They who jour - neyed on be - fore us, saints of God for - ev - er - more!
 For the chal - lenge of the call - ing, for the strength of Love's great might:
 There we're called to serve our neigh - bor, speak - ing truth and sow - ing seed.
 in the chang - ing world a - round us your cre - a - tive, trans - form - ing hand.
 We, your peo - ple stand be - fore you lift - ing up our thanks and praise.

Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Prais - ing God through all our days!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Grate - ful for their faith - ful ways!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Thank - ing God through all our days!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Serv - ing God through all our days!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Trust - ing God through all our days!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Prais - ing God through all our days!

Words: W J Matson, 2003, 2009
 Music: W J Matson, 2003

Tune: Norwood 150th
 8.7.8.7.8.7

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Process Resources

Critics corner: BOOKS

Feed The Fire: Avoiding Clergy Burnout, by Bruce G. Epperly (Pilgrim Press, 2008).

Four Seasons of Ministry: Gathering a Harvest of Righteousness, by Bruce G. Epperly (The Alban Institute, 2008).

Reviewed by BRIAN BRANDSMEIER

Katherine and Bruce Epperly bring their keen intellect and practical wisdom together in two books on maintaining effective and long-term ministerial leadership. At a time when there seems to be a growing chasm between theological academia and congregational life, the Epperlys provide an important bridge. They dare to bridge that gap to help pastors “feed the fire” (stay passionate and avoid burnout) through the “seasons of ministry” (from seminary through retirement). This is a big task—and an important one. It’s a task they take on not by offering overly simplistic platitudes, but by openly exploring options. The authors weave together scripture, process theology, practical strategies, and real life stories in ways that are thoughtfully nuanced yet pragmatically useful. These are books designed for busy pastors, chaplains, camp directors, etc., who want to more deeply reclaim their time, passion, and spirituality.

Feed The Fire: Avoiding Clergy Burnout

Many readers of *Creative Transformation* have friends in vocational ministry. That means we don’t get to see our friends very often. Pastors are busy

people, navigating a complex vocation. They barely have time to spend with their families. The continual stream of commitments is daunting: evening meetings, vacation Bible school, Lent, weekly sermons, and the list goes on and on. Not to mention the pastoral care emergencies. The blessing and curse is that most pastors want to be a faithful presence through it all. But being a faithful presence at “everything” usually means committing 50-70 hours each week. Such a busy pace can wear the best of us down over time. And that can lead to burnout, anger, frustration, etc. The fact is that vocational ministry can attract and create workaholics. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

In *Feed the Fire*, Katherine and Bruce Epperly seek to help pastors mindfully choose life-giving transformation over life-denying burnout. This obviously isn’t a once-in-a-lifetime choice. It’s a continual process of choosing transformation through daily intentionality. In their words, “Healthy, vital, and effective ministry is a matter of choice as well as grace” (20). The way they suggest engaging in this process is through practices that can feed the fire of healthy ministry.

The book is divided into seven main sections that include user-friendly examples of specific practices, affirmations, and covenants.

The sections include: (1) Honoring the body as a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (e.g. mindful breathing, grateful eating, meditative exercise). (2) Transforming the mind through attentiveness to our changing God and world (e.g. cultivating stature, open-mindedness, *lectio divina*). (3) Transforming the spirit through receptiveness to God’s ongoing presence and callings (e.g. spiritual formation, mindful prayer, theological humility). (4) Transforming time by finding a healthy faith-family-ministry balance (e.g. self-differentiation, fidelity to Sabbath, saying “yes” and “no”). (5) Transforming relationships by engaging in relational wholeness (e.g. healthy friendships, intentional colleague groups, living by a relational vision). (6) Creating stillness in the storm through prayerful and creative response (e.g. spiritual direction, professional mentoring, reacting pastorally). (7) Celebrating oneself in ministry through self-awareness (e.g. individuation, continuing education, mindfulness of the personality dy-

namics explored in the Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator).

The list above is limited and is only meant to whet the appetite. *Feed the Fire* is filled with practical application. So, if you want to spend more time with your clergy friends—and you want them to be in a better mood when you see them—this book is an excellent resource for all of you. The only thing missing is more details on how to break already-established patterns in oneself and in one's parishioners. Change is hard work. But perhaps that would need to be another book entirely! Despite that, this book deserves to be commended. The Epperlys have written an important book in the canon of self-care literature.

Four Seasons of Ministry: Gathering a Harvest of Righteousness

When a couple is expecting a baby, the most commonly read book is *What To Expect When You're Expecting*. It's a classic and practical book that helps couples navigate the complex journey of parenthood. While parenthood always remains humbling and challenging, *What To Expect* helps parents to make this voyage with a little more insight and confidence. It's an important book. But what does a person read when s/he becomes involved in vocational ministry? Like parenting, the journey of ministerial leadership is humbling and challenging. Pastors, too, need help in making this journey with greater wisdom and poise. We need a book such as: *What To Expect When You're Expecting...A Career in Vocational Ministry*. Thankfully, Katherine and Bruce Epperly have written a book about just this topic.

The Epperlys' book, *Four Seasons of Ministry*, is a guide to navigating the complex seasons of a lifetime in ministry. They bring their theological insight, spiritual depth, and practical wisdom together to help pastors be able to more mindfully engage in healthy and vital ministry through a lifetime in ministry. Their book helps to empower pastors to be able to say "yes" to the following question: "Can a life devoted to ministry continue to bring beauty to God, our congregations, our families, and ourselves" (6)? While each person has a unique journey, this book helps pastors to say "yes" to that question in the various contexts out of which they traverse. In order to break this broad topic down, they divide their book into four seasons of ministry.

The first season is Springtime. The spring is a time of discernment of call, nurturance of gifts, and seminary education. Seminary is the initial major step in this process. During seminary people learn an overwhelming amount of information and theology. This can feel overwhelming and deconstructive. It's the challenge of the seminarian to explore the practical implications of these theologies as well as find time for self-care and spirituality. As the Epperlys point out, "spiritual formation" and "theological reconstruction" are often parts of the theological education that get downplayed unless one comes to seminary with the goal of exploring these important elements (38). In order to thrive in this season, the Epperlys suggest vital-yet-sensible practices such as: finding a mentor, healthy eating, exercising joyfully, praying mindfully, and practicing Sabbath.

Then comes the Summertime, a season of exploration and growth in one's first call. During this time, feelings of anxiousness and inadequacy can emerge when one encounters the enormity of tasks (and ministerial "firsts") that are involved in ministry. To get through this phase, the Epperlys suggest seeking the council of colleagues, developing a vision for life, being intentional about budgeting one's time, practicing healthy relational stewardship, developing a flexible-yet-defined sense of pastoral authority, acknowledging that one's call is to be faithful but not perfect, etc. They also add a koan-esque question to continually ponder: "Will your spouse, partner, children, and closest friends also thank God for your calling into ordained ministry" (86)?

Third is Autumn. This season is about the "challenges of endurance and new opportunities for transformation" that come mid-career (6). Elements such as perfectionism, grief, and burnout can challenge one's endurance. The authors suggest that during this season, it's important to transform one's ministry through a variety of practices: continuing education, fostering self-awareness, dealing honestly with grief, resisting perfectionism, facilitating one's own growth through a clergy coach, etc.

Winter is the last season. Obviously this is a time of finding meaning, purpose, and ministerial role in retirement. Some experience this time as exciting while others see this time as disheartening. In either case, the Epperlys argue that it's important to face this stage of the adventure with mindfulness. Part of that mindfulness is engaging in the following practices:

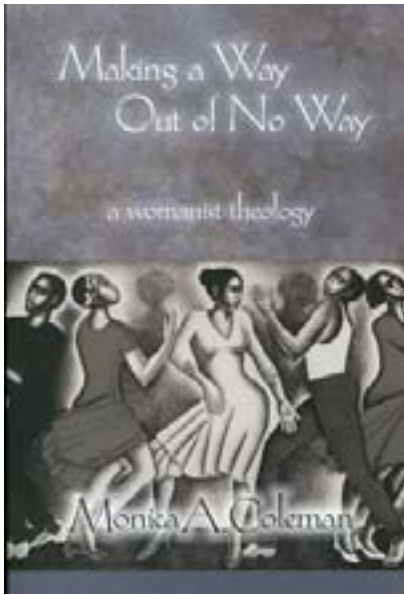
Critics corner: BOOKS

Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology, by Monica A. Coleman (Fortress Press, 2008).

Reviewed by ANDREA STEPHENSON

Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* presents the reader with an easily understandable outline of womanist theology (theology by and for black women) in light of process philosophy and postmodern thought with regard to the theme of salvation. The book demonstrates beautifully her belief "that what we believe about God, ourselves, and the world affects how we operate within the world." During a time in which "academic" and "practical" theology are often separated from one another, Coleman's determination to link them together is something that more theologians should attempt in order to keep theological thought alive today. Rather than writing from the position of a pure academic, Coleman acknowledges the many facets of both her academic life and personal life as a black woman in the United States and the ways in which the many aspects of life and one's theological thought are mutually implicated in the development of one another. *Making a Way Out of No Way* is true to Coleman's desire to develop a theology that is not just for theologians and to remember that everyone is a theologian. Even those who have not experienced the type of marginalization forced on black women can to some extent comprehend the justice issues underlying womanist theology and come away from the book with a desire to see theology continue to progress in this manner.

Coleman's work centers on the concept of salvation, which she reframes in light of postmodern, process, and womanist ideas to mean "health and wholeness." She explains that womanist theology, as with any other theology, is not a unified way of thinking. Rather, different womanist theo-



logians think about theological concepts in a variety of ways. The examples she gives with respect to the concept of salvation from thinkers such as Delores Williams and Karen Baker-Fletcher demonstrate these differences while highlighting the overarching desire of most womanist theologians to develop a theology that takes into account the actual experiences of those who live on the margins. As Coleman explains, it makes sense that theologies developed out of experience are different since experience itself is wide-ranging. Even so, Coleman finds a phrase that can encompass the commitments of these theologians, "making a way out of no way," which includes "God's presentation of unforeseen possibilities;

human agency; the goal of justice, survival, and quality of life; and a challenge to the existing order." The ensuing exploration of these four elements of making a way out of no way with regard to postmodern womanist viewpoints with a commitment to process theology is well-organized and easy to understand, making this section, in particular, the perfect resource for pastors or Sunday school teachers attempting to expose their congregations or classes to types of theological thinking that might be outside their realm of experience within the institutional church.

The notion of creative transformation is perhaps one of the most helpful in connecting the womanist, postmodern, and process perspectives and is vitally important for her interconnection of the theological and the practical. It is also a useful tool for those who are counseling or leading individuals and communities who are experiencing times of great turmoil and hopelessness. Rather than developing a theology in which the evils in the world are diminished,

seen as salvific in themselves, or seen as something to be endured until justice comes in the life beyond this life, the theology of making a way out of no way through creative transformation is a way of empowering the marginalized communities, acknowledging and honoring their experiences, and giving them a theology of hope for the future of their lives in this world. As Coleman writes, “Salvation is about the activity of communities. These communities are creatively transforming the world through the acts of teaching and healing.”

One of the most interesting challenges Coleman presents to traditional womanist theology by way of postmodern worldviews is that of religious pluralism. In order to develop a postmodern womanist theology Coleman seeks to uplift the ways in which traditional African religious practices and beliefs have been incorporated into Christian practices and beliefs and to demonstrate the fact that this combination is not theologically at odds with a notion of health and wholeness, or salvation. While her exploration of the beliefs and practices of the traditional African religions might be better understood if it were interwoven into her postmodern womanist and process point of view (particularly considering the fact that she points to the way in which these traditional beliefs and practices became interwoven with much of Christianity for many within the African community in the United States), she presents the historical inclusion of traditional African religions in Christian practices and acknowledges the necessity of recognizing and honoring those traditions in an interesting and enticing manner.

All in all, *Making a Way Out of No Way* provides not only a clear description of womanist, postmodern, and process theologies, making the book a good resource for anyone attempting to learn the basics of these theological viewpoints, but it also gives the reader an example of the way in which theological thought simultaneously is influenced by and contributes to the way in which we live our lives. For anyone who has felt themselves shoved to the margins, Monica Coleman’s *Making a Way Out of No Way* is a valuable contribution to notions of salvation that emphasize health and wholeness in this world. Reading the stories of women who have experienced tremendous evils and yet have found a way to believe and hope is a powerful testament to the intersection between thought and action.

[Epperly review, continued on page 33](#)

exploring alternative ways to stay connected to ministry, celebrating one’s ministerial history, opening more deeply to forgiveness, expressing gratitude, accepting praise, trusting that God is faithful through all of life, sharing one’s wisdom, etc.

The Epperlys’ exploration of these four seasons gives pastors at all stages of ministry a description of some of the realities they will face, and some of the practices that can help them navigate each season with grace. It’s descriptive without being prescriptive. It’s practical without being overly simplistic. And it offers user-friendly wisdom without offering user-ignorable platitudes. The gift of this book is that it takes on a broad topic yet manages to provide down-to-earth insight: “a commitment to self-awareness, openness to God’s leading, and professional self-care are at the heart of vital and healthy ministry at every stage of life” (153). Simple yet profound. The Epperlys are the “Thich Nhat Hanhs” of practical theology. And if we’re smart enough to practice their wisdom, we might all experience a little more Zen.

Brian Brandsmeier is a recent graduate of Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis, Missouri. Brian and his partner Sara have been engaged in youth ministry for many years. They also enjoy leading creative worship experiences for various groups. Together they host a blog that features their ponderings, poetry, liturgy, and music at ephphatha-poetry.blogspot.com. Currently they work with youth with special needs in the Iowa City Community School District.

About the cover ...

My spouse and I rescued these lilies from my grandmother’s garden when the family moved her into assisted living a few years ago. My grandma Josephine had described to me how she had transplanted those same flowers from her mother’s garden, some 70 years before that, and moved them with her to each place she lived. When she passed away in July 2009 at the age of 90, a photo of Grandma’s Lilies adorned the cover of the funeral program. Grandma’s Lilies now occupy the heart of our garden in Minneapolis, MN, a loving and lovely reminder of her ongoing presence in our lives. -Paul Joseph Greene

The View from GOD

by JOAN LUCAS

Tyler and Lucas were punching each other in fun as they wandered down the Sunday School hallway. It was a Sunday afternoon and church was long over, but Tyler's mom was still working with the altar guild so it would be awhile before she could take them home.

"Look," said Tyler suddenly. In the middle of the hallway was a ladder leading down from the ceiling. Peter, the pastor's son, had told them about an attic space above the Sunday school rooms. He'd explained how Mr. Greeley, the church janitor, would use a long stick to pull a door open from the ceiling, and then a folding ladder would drop down. Now here was the ladder. Mr. Greeley must have forgotten to put it away. Lucas quickly climbed up the rungs.

"This is so cool!" he said, already crawling onto the floor above. Tyler hesitated a moment and then climbed after him. The attic was dimly lit by a row of low windows. The afternoon sun shone along the wooden floor, but it was hard to see clearly what was stacked in the high shelves that surrounded the room. Tyler crept carefully after his friend.

"Do you think this floor is safe?" he whispered.

"Look at all this old stuff," said Lucas.

Tyler tried to be brave like his friend. He picked out a large book from the shelf. Inside were old photos of what must have been the church a long time ago. In one of the photos Tyler thought he recognized old Mr. Greeley as a young man.

A creaky noise started behind them and then the ladder door slammed shut. Tyler and Lucas were trapped.

"This could be bad," said Tyler, "maybe we should call for help."

"Wait," said Lucas. "Let's see if there is another way out first." He moved along the wall.

"Come, here," he said excitedly. "I found a little door." Tyler quickly joined him. Lucas opened the door and they saw a wide space beyond. There was no sturdy floor ahead though, only flimsy panels, and one of the nearby panels was missing. Both boys leaned over to look down. They could see a large Sunday school room where a meeting was starting. How strange it was to be looking down on the adults below. Tyler thought of how this was the kind of view he always imagined God must have.

He could see Mr. Burton talking in a very serious way. "I think it is important to keep this information to ourselves," Mr. Burton said.

"Yes," said another important looking man, "Tom Greeley has put in many years as our church janitor."

"Without ever becoming a member," said a woman, as if that meant he could not be trusted.

"I saw him take the money," added another woman.

Tyler and Lucas looked at each other. Were they saying that Mr. Greeley was a thief?

"That's why I think we should call Tom in here, and if it looks like he is guilty, ask him to leave his position," said Mr. Burton.

"But what if he lies about not taking the money?" asked Mr. Arnold, who Tyler thought was too bossy and loud. "Are we going to believe him and give him the chance to steal again?"

"I saw him take the money out of the church safe," repeated the woman.

"In my business, anyone caught stealing is immediately fired," said Mr. Arnold firmly. Everyone in the meeting was quiet then. Tyler held his breath. How mad would these people be if they knew two kids were listening?

"Rita, please find Tom and bring him in." said Mr. Burton. Rita quickly got up as he was talking and left.

"Wait!" shouted Lucas. "Mr. Greeley is

a good man! He wouldn't steal!" The adults looked around in alarm.

"Who is speaking?" Mr. Burton asked nervously.

"What are you doing?" Tyler hissed frantically at Lucas.

"I'm telling these people that Mr. Greeley is not a crook!" shouted Lucas. One of the women below gasped.

"Oh, my goodness!" she said. "There are two little children up in the ceiling!"

Everyone murmured in concern.

"Hold still, you two," said Mr. Burton. "We'll find a way to get you down, just don't move!"

Some of the people were pushing a table underneath the open panel and talking about who would be able to reach them best.

"What seems to be the problem?" asked an older voice. It was Tom Greeley, the janitor. It only took a moment for him to assess the situation. "What you children will get into," he said, not unkindly and left the classroom. Then the children could hear the attic door opening. Tyler and Lucas knelt guiltily by the opening as Mr. Greeley pulled down the ladder.

"You two must have scampered up there quick," scolded Mr. Greeley. "I only left the ladder down for a minute."

"I know we shouldn't have been up there," said Tyler. He was worried about what his mother would say. Lucas, meanwhile, started blurting out how there had been a meeting

about firing Mr. Greeley.

"They said you took money from the church safe!" he said.

Mr. Greeley took a step back and hung his head. "It's true," he said. "I did take the money, but I've been working a second job so that I can pay it back. It's just that I didn't have enough to pay the mortgage again, let alone decent groceries. My wife and I never imagined her medical bills would be so expensive." There was a tense silence. Mr. Arnold approached the janitor.

"Tom," he said. "I know times are tough, but in my business there is no excuse ever for stealing." Mr. Greeley nodded. "So," added Mr. Arnold, "there is only one thing to do. Instead of borrowing from the church, you are going to have to let me lend you money." Mr. Greeley looked up in disbelief. The other adults crowded around him.

"You're a good man, Tom," said Mr. Burton. "We can't afford to allow stealing, but we can afford to be a true church community and reach out with concern to your situation."

"Like you had concern for me and Lucas instead of telling us we're in trouble?" asked Tyler. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he realized this was probably not the right thing to say. But then the adults were smiling and laughing together.

"Oh, we'll let your mother answer that question," said Mr. Arnold as he helped Mr. Greeley close up the attic door."

Discussion Questions

1. *How do you think God sees, hears and feels what goes on in the world?*
2. *How well do you think we can figure out what God wants us to do?*
3. *What can help us understand better what God wants us to do?*
4. *Why do you think God wants us to be careful about throwing things away?*

The Adventures of Fred & Al







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