

RESPONSE TO THE ESSAYS

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A Word of Thanks:

It is a great and undeserved stroke of luck when one finds companions, both critical and supportive, who are willing to travel for some distance with him along his theological path. It helps to overcome the loneliness and separation pains that one suffers when he leaves behind the usual paths of tradition and forges ahead into new territory. One expects neither absolute approval nor obedient followers who merely repeat everything that one says. Rather, what one really needs are companions who, from their own presuppositions break out in the same direction and get fresh impetus for their own ideas. I have found this in great measure in this book edited by Bob Cornelison. The essays fill me with deep gratitude.

As the ancient Latin saying goes, books "have their own destiny." What the author thinks and how well he expresses his ideas is one thing; what the readers make of the book in their own minds, how they understand the book and what they ultimately do with it is another thing entirely. Therefore, the impact of a book resides in the reader, and seldom, if ever, wholly in the intentions of the author. It is both exciting, yet stressful for an author to recognize the history of the impact of his thought in the echo and exchange of opinion of his readers. The author is always merely an actor in the drama and the history that books create. If his books are published, they go their own way and cannot and must not be controlled by the author. Whether friend or critic, or both in the same person, interpret my theological thought, it does not so much interest me whether they have interpreted it correctly, but rather what they have made out of it either consciously or unconsciously. Something new always arises and that profoundly stimulates me to look at things anew and to learn from that new perspective. I have read these essays with great interest and have benefited immensely from them.

Robert T. Cornelison was my assistant during the 1984-1985 academic year at Emory University. His book, *Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism and Jürgen Moltmann's Political Theology: The Realism of Hope* (Mellen, 1992), revealed to me some of the boundaries of my own standpoint and also clarified for me the rich

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American tradition of political theology typical at that time. He also pushed me to further develop and deepen a theory of modernity out of my *Theology of Hope*. I hope he recognizes the fruits of his influence in my recent collection of essays, *God for a Secular Society* (SCM/Fortress, 1999). When I think about the theme of the public relevance of theology, I often remember our discussions in Atlanta and in Tübingen.

Clarke Chapman of Moravian Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is an old friend and a true intellectual companion. I no longer remember exactly where we met, but I know that he is one who has followed all of the various turns (and wrong turns?) I have taken. He has comprehended all of my changes of thought, even when I was not consciously aware of them. He knows Dietrich Bonhoeffer's influence on me better than I do myself. Early on, he recognized my sympathy with the developing Black Theology of James Cone, and because he, himself, has an amazing grasp of the work of Carl Jung, he always forced me to think about the anthropological consequences of my "high" theology. Through him, my interest in Zinzendorf's theology and the Moravian community (an interest that was further reinforced later in Nicaragua) was awakened.

A.J. ("Chip") Conyers, I met in the Baptist community in Louisville, Kentucky. His book, *God, Hope, and History: Jürgen Moltmann and the Christian Concept of History* (Mercer, 1988), clearly and methodically presented my somewhat disordered thoughts about history, eschatology, and the experience of history. In that book, he accomplished something that I had not. His essay in the current volume is so clear, that I could not have presented it any clearer. He brought to light what was still darkness in my thought, and for that I remain grateful.

Stephen Rhodes was a doctoral student at Emory University when I was visiting professor there. I met him again at the Presbyterian Seminary in Memphis, where he had moved on to working with poor congregations in Appalachia. I admire how he has made his way out of the ivory tower of academe into the real world of practical community work, for I, myself, moved from the practical work of being a pastor in a rural congregation to the thin air of the academic world, and yearn to return to the "touch" and "feel" of real life.

My thoughts on ecclesiology which formed the book *Church in the Power of the Spirit* (1975) were not developed at my writing desk, but in house-to-house visits from family to family in rural congregations, and in discussions in student groups. For me, the concept of "love" was always a bit too emotional and abstract. As Rhodes points out, the concept of "open friendship," the personal affection for the other that is bound up with respect for his or her freedom, is for me much more concrete. I can "live" friendship better. As the beautiful poem by Joan Walsh states it, "A friend is someone who likes you; what better thing is there, than to find such a friend?"

In November 1992, I was asked to give the Ryan Lectures at Asbury Theological Seminary where I had the honor of meeting **Laurence Wood**. In 1993, an entire volume of *The Asbury Theological Journal* was dedicated to my work. Wood approaches my thought from the Methodist perspective, a rich tradition with which I had come in contact when I was guest professor at Duke and at Emory. Wood correctly traces my path from Barth's trinitarian Christology to my trinitarian pneumatology. I would like to tread further down this path because I believe that as we enter the third millennium of the Church, we stand at the brink of a new experience of theology and of the Holy Spirit. During the first

millennium of the Church, in the name of God the Father, a "holy supremacy" and hierarchy developed. During the second millennium, in the name of God the Son, a "brotherly community" arose. Now, in the third millennium of the Church it is time, in the name of God the Holy Spirit, for a "charismatic community" to be discovered, in which women and men with different abilities and calls can live together. We have always understood the Spirit either as the "Spirit of the Father" or as "Spirit of the Son," not as *God the Spirit* whose saving economy is the full and fulfilled life of all creation.

A response to the essay by **Millicent Feske** is naturally difficult for me. When one peers into a mirror and does not fully recognize oneself, the problem can lie with the mirror itself. In her essay on my theology of the cross, Millicent Feske basically repeats a well-known argument that has been leveled against Christianity as a whole. While she claims that these opinions arise out of a liberationist/feminist perspective, in reality they arise out of the liberal, bourgeois, indeed masculinist theology (or anti-theology) of the Enlightenment. Whether God the Father is "sadistic," whether the sufferings of Christ is "child abuse," whether the cross of Christ can somehow take on the sufferings of the poor, the oppressed, and debased women, whether the sufferings of Christ support a religious and thus also militaristic/nationalist cult of sacrifice, was first raised by Lessing and Voltaire, and now two hundred years later these claims seem to me to be merely repeated again. It seems to me that such claims ultimately serve neither the emancipation of women nor the liberation of slaves, but ultimately lead only to an abandonment (as with Voltaire) of Christianity. Such perspectives do not seem to get to the heart of the problem of suffering in any critical sense.

I am also a bit bewildered that Millicent Feske seems content with negatively applying the label, "Neo-orthodoxy," to my thought, rather than dealing with Barth, or others, critically. It is not totally unknown that the martyrs of the Confessing Church in Germany who were murdered by the Nazis were "Neo-orthodox." There were no Liberal Theologians there.

It also strikes me as a bit strange that Dr. Feske, (a white, middle-class "Euro-American") focussing on my social location as a "white, middle-class, Christian male," seems to label my theology as "bourgeois." Although I may be a member of the First World and also male, that does not necessarily mean that my theology is only reflective and supportive of my social location and automatically results in the oppression of the Third World and of women. Oppression must be overthrown from both sides. In my theology the liberation of the Third World and of females is intimately linked with the liberation of their oppressors and the humanization of males. This has little to do with the phantom of a liberal "formal subject" of my theology, as Dr. Feske seems to think, but has much to do with the struggle for liberation.

Anyone who, out of a love for justice, chooses to enter such a struggle, must be prepared to suffer for it. In my theology of the Cross, I have consistently maintained the necessity for "active" suffering on behalf of the other, not about some sort of "religious mystification" of passive suffering. One who does not see that simply misunderstands my work.

John Cobb, Jr., is one of my oldest acquaintances and one of the most respected and admired theologians in America. He takes theology seriously and one feels taken seriously by him, even when he disagrees with one's own perspective. I have long awaited his

response to my doctrine of creation, because, indeed, my book is, in a sense, a response to his ecological theology in a process perspective.

I first learned of his theology through Wolfhart Pannenberg, and must admit that I held him for a liberal theologian of culture who had little understanding of the revolutionary changes of the 1960s. As I first heard about ecological concerns in the mid-1960s, I thought about nature conservancies. As I read Cobb's *Natural Theology*, I had a Barthian shudder, and held him to be naïve. That view, however, quickly changed. As my eyes slowly became open to the oil crisis of 1973, I realized that John Cobb had already long been there, and learned from him. My generation in Germany came out of the "horrors of history," searched for a "sense to history," and was enmeshed in political conflicts. "History" was the field and milieu of our thought. "Nature" appeared romantic to us. This changed after the end of the Vietnam War and the beginning of horrible man-made natural catastrophes. My path took me from history to nature, especially the Nature of the blue planet Earth. As many critics noticed, my theology became somewhat "greener." Cobb, on the other hand, approached the problem from the opposite direction, from "Nature" to ecology, and then from ecology to economics and politics. So he and I often met in the middle, with him sometimes following my lead, and with me sometimes following his, with our theologies mutually influencing each other. I must admit, however, that he is a master of relational thinking, and does it much better than I do.

In front of me is the book *Hope and the Future of Man*, that Ewert Cousins had edited in 1972 after a conference of theologians of history, hope and Political Theology (Pannenberg, Metz, and myself) along with process theologians (Cobb, Hefner, Daniel Williams, Schubert, Ogden). Charles Hartshorne was also present, both in person and very much in spirit. John Cobb spoke on "Whitehead's Vision of the Future," and I explored the relationship between oppressed creation and liberated creation. So that is how we met in those early days.

I would like to address briefly two questions that Cobb raises in his essay.

1. In *God in Creation* I was not merely addressing the struggle for the protection of the environment, but was also attempting a revision of the entire Christian doctrine of creation. It may well be, as Cobb points out, that the struggle may not be explicitly recognizable in every chapter. There is, however, something that lies between the current conflict over nature and the divine promise of a new earth: the experience of God the Spirit of Life and the life-giving life of God (*vita vivificans*) not only in the new life of human beings, but also in the new creation of Nature. When Process Theology calls God's power "persuasive and empowering," it means this presence of the eternally living One. If one desires to express this theologically, then it means that pneumatology is the "present" eschatology that arises out of "futurist" eschatology. I attempted to develop this pneumatological doctrine of Creation in *The Spirit of Life* (1991), but did not take it far enough. In writing *God in Creation*, I found the expectation of a fundamental metaphysical transformation of the cosmos, as expressed by Process Theology in its concept of the "objective impassability" of all things in the memory of God, a great help. If this memory is already present in the consequent nature of God, it is not difficult to understand the new creation of all past beings into eternal creation. Cosmologically, of course, this is a huge extrapolation that offers no real picture of the history of the cosmos, but it does resemble the big-

bang theory, which the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the contingency of the cosmos and its "beginningless Beginning" seems to come close to portraying.

My hope for a *consumatio mundi* does not arise out of soothsaying or prophecy, but out of the Judeo-Christian promissory history: God not only promises, God keeps those promises. It is not that I am prophesying like a fortuneteller. Indeed, my ideas on *creatio ex nihilo*, like my ideas on the resurrection, are not as speculative as they may seem. They are grounded in the present experience of the faith of Abraham in the God who "brings the dead to life and calls into existence that which does not exist." This is the faith of "hoping when there is little to hope for." (Romans 4:17) We need this sort of belief and hope for the next century, after having "survived" the present century of wars and genocide and the destruction of the human and of Nature. Those who come after us must somehow live with the abyss of extermination. In order to do this, they will need a strong and supportive hope.

Jose Miguez Bonino is one of those unusual friends who, even when critical of one's perspective, carries so much respect that one wants to immediately agree with him. We have known each other for thirty years, but apart from my 1977 lectures at ISEDET in Buenos Aires, we have only met with each other in the United States. We were both guest professors at Candler School of Theology in Emory University where, in 1988, together with President Jimmy Carter, we held a conference on Theology, Politics, and Peace (T. Runyon, editor, *Theology, Politics and Peace*, 1989). That was a year before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the unification of Germany. Whenever I think about my Argentinean friend, I always feel a bit ashamed about my 1976 "Open Letter" to him. It was phrased so adversely that many thought that I had turned my back on Liberation Theology. Rubem Alves most certainly thought so. The letter was simply a call to overcome Liberation Theology's incommunication with outside perspectives that Hugo Assmann had announced in Genf, and then practiced on me personally in Mexico City in 1977. On the following morning, Sergio Arce from Cuba, a "theologian after the Revolution," came to me and asked if I would take on his son for study in Tübingen. His trust in me provided a bit of comfort. If I were to write an "Open Letter" at all, it should have been after my travels through Latin America.

As one of the editors of *Concilium*, I entered into a long, friendly discussion with Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino, and came to understand that Latin American liberation theology indeed needed some space to develop its own perspective in order to prevent the theological syncretism that had previously existed. In 1991, I came to know parts of Nicaragua while on a trip funded by the Goethe Institute. I held lectures at the Protestant seminary CIEETS, was involved in the founding of the Universidad Evangelica Nicarauense and since then have often been in Managua. So finally, the "love-hate" relationship between liberation theologians and me finally turned into a "close relationship."

In response to Jose Miguez Bonino's essay, I can only say that he is correct: the way that Third World theology has been treated, in fact mistreated and disrespected, by European theology is totally unsatisfactory and indignant, especially by a European theology that is becoming more and more provincial. I recently wrote an article, "Political Theology and Liberation Theology," in which I attempted to show that since modern

"globalization" not only brings the economy of the First World into the Third, but also brings with it the consciousness of the social injustices of the Third World into the First, then we must also bring Liberation Theology out of the Third World and into the First (*God for a Secular Society*, pp. 66-70, Fortress, 1999). However, it is certainly not enough for our generation alone to deal critically with global economic processes; our students in the next generation must also struggle with them, if they wish to survive.

At this point, I would like to address a theological issue in which I have changed my perspective. Since *Gaudium et Spes* and the Latin American Bishop's Conferences in Medellin and Puebla, a new theological paradigm has developed, one that is firmly stamped by Liberation Theology. In place of the old, Thomistic "Nature-Grace" schema, the Nature side is replaced by "Dynamic of History" with its "signs of the times." Consequently, the "Grace" side can no longer be understood as "supernature," but must be understood eschatologically as the coming "kingdom of God" and the "New Creation of all things." Nature-Grace is thus replaced by a History-Eschatology schema, in which the present and future are understood as reciprocally influencing each other: the eschatological future is already present in history, and present suffering and praxis exists in the future of God. As Gustavo Gutierrez states in the recent revision of his book, *Theology of Liberation*, (1992), "Every healthy, fruitful Liberation Theology is grounded in the kingdom of God." Similarly, we find Jon Sobrino stating that the kingdom of God is the "fullness of life" here and now, and from the operation of the Spirit of God, is "fulfilled life." In the creative energy of the Spirit, the eschatological dynamic of the coming kingdom is present. If he is correct, then we are not to look for what is "not yet," as Gustavo is proposing, but (in the presence of the Spirit of God) must identify the future kingdom of God with the present desire for liberation. What I had criticized in 1976, now appears to me to be the strength of Liberation Theology: in "presentist" eschatology, the future of God is pulled into the human present, without, however, disappearing there. It is the martyrs who say to us "what comes next" and "for whom the bell tolls." In 1994, at the graves of the slain Jesuits in San Salvador, I sensed what the martyrs were saying to us:

When, if not now?

Where, if not here?

Who, if not we?

Translated by Robert T. Cornelison