

THE MEANING AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

There is a fairly widespread and impressively documented opinion that a distinctively American theology is practically nonexistent. It is contended that the work of theologians in America is almost entirely transplanted European theology. Sidney Mead, for example, while commenting on the outstanding accomplishment of religion in America, namely, religious freedom, also mentions its outstanding failure, theological structure.¹ This means that any discussion of a characteristically American theology must be rather the outline of a project than the description of an achievement.

Perhaps it is worth saying at the outset that although we may as yet have no completed American theology, the task has in my opinion been actually begun. (I experience a kind of personal embarrassment when I reflect on how little acquainted with it I am.) But when the future ecumenical, pluralistic, American theology has come to some maturity it will, I believe, recognize its roots in the works of men like William James, Walter Rauschenbusch, Gustave Weigel, John Courtney Murray, and Reinhold Niebuhr, to mention only a few names of some who have died.

Some, however, might wish to question the validity of the very idea of an American theology. Ideally, they would say, theology is one, no matter where it is developed or by what nation. If the Europeans have preceded us in this matter, we can, without embarrassment or any sense of failure, appropriate what they have done

¹ Cf. *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1963), p. 15. The same thought is expressed by Thomas F. O'Meara and Donald M. Weisser in the introductory article of the volume they edited *Projections: Shaping an American Theology for the Future*: "Although talking about an American theology is exciting and popular, American theology is almost nonexistent . . . there has been little creative reflection or planning about what has happened and is happening in America." (Garden City: Doubleday, Image, 1970), p. 12.

This is likewise the conclusion of an extended study by Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Theology in America: A Historical Survey," in *The Shaping of American Religion*, James W. Smith and A. Leland Jamison eds., *Religion in American Life*, 1, (Princeton: Princeton U., 1961), p. 320.

and make it our own. We should, of course, be alert to making our contribution to the general theological scene, not thinking of this as an American but rather as a human and Christian contribution.

The notion of a single ideal theology is no doubt attractive, but it fails to recognize the temporal conditioning of all human achievements and the fact that theology is a human achievement. There has never been, nor can there be, a theology which is not marked by the history and culture of the time in which it is produced. I wish, then, in this paper to proceed in two stages; first to indicate the legitimacy of the idea of a national theology, showing where in the construction of theology influences of culture and history are operative; and secondly, to set forth the project of an American theology, a project which this entire meeting is concerned to further in some way. This discussion then is largely heuristic, indicating the forms and classifications to be filled out by the development of an American theology.

As we turn our attention to the idea of a distinctive national theology and to an American theology in particular, it might be well to note the danger inherent in this enterprise. James M. Robinson has observed,

'American' theology is as suspect of nationalism as is 'black' theology of racism. To make light of their dangerous potentiality would merely expose one as prejudiced, in assuming that the chauvinistic groups in this case were harmlessly inferior. If German theology renders no other service in the era of American hegemony than to draw attention to its own burnt fingers, it will have rendered an invaluable service.²

However, with this danger noted, Dr. Robinson proceeds to indicate how an American theology might well be in place. "Yet in an age when internationalism has time on its side and when Bayer aspirin may be replaced by International Business Machine as the symbol of international wares, international theology may not only become an American export as well as import, but there may even

² "Language in America," in *Projections: Shaping an American Theology for the Future*, p. 161.

be a favorable balance of trade."³ A distinctively American theology, then, does not mean theology developed in isolation for exclusively national purposes in a kind of self-adulation. It means to draw upon the experience and wisdom of one's own national heritage and to contribute this to the universal enrichment of mankind as a whole.

The most durable description of theology seems to me that given by Anselm in the preface to his *Proslogion*: "*fides quaerens intellectum*." We may translate this as "the search for an understanding of man's relationship to God." I should like to indicate five elements or areas within this description of theology in which cultural and historical conditioning can be observed, and which, therefore, would mark a theology as belonging to a particular time and place. The first is man's relationship to God, faith itself. Secondly, questions concerning that relationship, the dynamics of the search for understanding. Thirdly, the sources of evidence for answering those questions, where it is thought this relationship to God is made manifest. Fourthly, the categories of understanding in which the answers are framed, those concepts and ideas which illuminate that relationship to God. And finally, fifth, the structures or orders of arrangement in which the answers are set so that they might form a coherent unity and illumine one another. Let us examine briefly each of these five areas to see how it is conditioned by the life and the culture of those searching for an understanding of man's relationship to God.

The first and most basic area for cultural diversity in theology is man's relationship to God, faith itself. This may seem to contradict the Apostle's assurance that there is one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism.⁴ If there is but one faith how can we speak of diversities of faith and diversities of man's relationship to God? The contention that faith itself admits a pluralism is not an espousal of complete historical relativism, nor a suggestion that contradictory propositions about God might be simultaneously true or legitimately affirmed. It is rather an affirmation of variety within unity. The unity of faith is not a unity of simplicity but a unity of complexity in which parts and aspects and components mutually enrich and

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Cf. *Eph.* 4:5.

complement one another. The fact is that each human individual and each group of human persons stand in their own unique relationships to God. However true it may be that God manifests himself universally as Savior, as the beneficent Lord who seeks to share his life with all his children, the fact remains that he deals with all of us with a sovereign liberty respecting the individual differences and personal characteristics that he has given to us and that we have developed through our own decision. We may notice this kind of difference in theology within the Bible itself. Old Testament theology is not New Testament theology and within the Old Testament pre-exilic theology is not post-exilic theology. One element of this diversity is precisely a differing relationship to God in these various situations. In the history of the Christian Church itself we may say that the theology of St. Augustine reflects his experience of the grace of God in a way that the theology of St. John Chrysostom does not. The *Autobiography* of St. Theresa of Avila is a theological work which is considerably different from the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius and this, at least partially, is due to the fact that each of the writers had his own personal relationship to God. Furthermore, in addition to the freedom of the divine initiative in men's lives and the freedom of the individual's response to God, there seem to be two additional factors that are of great importance for man's relationship to God and which concern us in a very direct way, namely, society and history. One's relationships with other human persons and the influence of past decisions and events inevitably condition the way in which a man can stand before God. They even help to mediate the divine initiative toward him.

While the most basic area where distinctive theological conditioning is possible is that of man's relationship to God, the area of faith itself, the second most important area would seem to be the questions whereby one seeks an understanding of this relationship, the questions which lie at the origin of the theological enterprise properly so-called. Theological questions are, by definition, ultimate questions; but the quest for the ultimate will appear differently in different circumstances. One's cultural outlook will itself determine in large measure both the questions that are posed and the way they are posed. St. Augustine's great theological work, the *City of God*,

was prompted by the question, "How did the Roman Empire fall?" The civilization of the Middle Ages asked "How is the power and the authority of God present in the world and in human society?" Later on, nationalism prompted the question, "Do kings rule by divine right?" How the human thirst for ultimate meaning is expressed will depend upon many conditions of culture, society and personal temperament.

The third area where conditioning takes place is in the sources of evidence, where one looks to find the answers, where one expects the truth of our relationship to God to manifest itself. In the Old Testament, besides the traditions which had been written down, there were the prophets who spoke the promise and the threat of God to Israel. Among the Greeks the cosmos itself spoke of God. The Christian community has found in the declarations of the teaching authority of the Church, especially in ecumenical councils, evidence of the relationship of man to God and the meaning of faith. All of these diverse sources of evidence tend to give a characteristic tone to the theology which is built upon them.

Closely related to the foregoing areas involved in developing a theology is the fourth one, that of the categories or kinds of ideas in which the evidence is expressed and answers set forth. We recognize in scripture the categories of covenant, promise, faithfulness, sin and so forth, as ways in which man tries to understand and express his relationship to God. In the theological world of the Greek Fathers, the categories of immortality and knowledge were of great importance. The theology of the middle ages employed the categories of order, being, and causality, reflecting both the political and the philosophical conditions of that time. Contemporary continental European theology has made great use of the category of human existence in order to explain man's relationship to God.

Finally, the very structural organization of theology can reflect the special qualifying conditions of culture, personality and history. For example, theology may be arranged as a narrative as in so much of the Bible. Or it may take the form of an integrated system as in the *Summa* of St. Thomas, where all things are seen as proceeding from God and returning to God. Or it may reflect the requirements of religious experience and be organized as Friederic Schleier-

macher's, with a primary emphasis upon the qualitative states of human subjectivity moving then to God and to his action on the world.⁵ These very arrangements, by the position and emphasis they give, reflect a particular conditioning of an age and place.

In these five ways at least, then, a theology will be conditioned by time and place and be able to reflect the national traditions and characteristics of a people: relationship to God, questions, sources of evidence, categories of understanding, and arrangement of answers.

As we proceed now to suggest a content for these five categories from American life, it is clear that American theology will not be simply a marriage of an American metaphysics with revelation. A philosophical system by itself is not the most significant factor in the development of theology. It is necessary, rather, to consider the events, persons, and institutions that manifest and deepen the spirit of a people and their way of looking at the world. I should like to begin this section, then, by pointing very briefly to certain great areas of American life which lie at the root of the distinctive American spirit. The *first* of these is the land itself. America was the new world, discovered, explored and colonized. The famous frontier thesis of Turner attributed the whole distinctive development of the American people to this quality of the land. This thesis may have been something of an oversimplification, but it did point to a matter of tremendous influence. The availability of land and the consequent possibility of independence promoted the growth of liberty and equality and individual initiative, although the frontier by itself could not create these.

This leads then to a *second* factor determining the American spirit, namely the kind of people who came here. There were immigrants from many nations and cultures. Insofar as they came willingly, they were seeking a new life, liberty, and fresh opportunities. Americans, from this point of view, are either adventurers or the descendants of adventurers. They tend to have an adaptability and resourcefulness that permits them to live and grow in unaccustomed circumstances. We should also point to another class of people who came to this land, not of their own volition, but as slaves to be

⁵ See *The Christian Faith*, Chap. I, "The Definition of Dogmatics," #30, (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1963), pp. 125-127.

bought and sold as chattel. The present quality of life in America is influenced by both these types of persons.

The *third* area of the peculiar American spirit is to be sought in the social institutions which developed in this country. These were of two sorts: institutions of liberation, and institutions of oppression. For example, the political forms of government in America from the earliest colonial days reflected a concern for liberty and democratic involvement. The care taken to develop an educational system, to provide literacy and instruction for all persons and classes, gave birth to an institution of liberation. But, alongside institutions of freedom we must note the ways in which certain groups of human beings were systematically deprived of their rights and their liberty. We have in mind the institution of slavery and even after this was dissolved, the kind of social discrimination which was incorporated into a way of life. There is in addition the way in which the original native population of America was sometimes kept in a kind of bondage and the way in which some other minority groups and classes were not accorded the same kind of opportunity and protection that the rest were.

A *fourth* striking facet of American life and culture is that of the development of science, technology and industry. These developments have given the American nation a power over the material world in transportation, communication, and the provision of goods and services. This has resulted in enormous national wealth. America has also manifested and developed a spirit of pragmatism, not merely as a philosophical system, but as a way of looking at things and testing them on their actual results and accomplishments.⁶ Technology continually produces an increasing acceleration of social processes and a profound transformation of American society.⁷

⁶ Bryan Wilson, citing a work by Robin M. Williams, *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (New York, 1961), notes the following distinctively American values: achievement, success, activity, work, efficiency, practicality, progress, material comfort, equality. Cf. "Religion and the Churches in Contemporary America, in *Religion in America*, McLoughlin and Bellah, eds., (Boston: Beacon Press, Daedalus Library), p. 102.

⁷ Herbert Richardson finds in technology and its results America's most distinctive trait: ". . . what is uniquely characteristic of America is not what she shares with modern Europe, but her faith in social technology." About the influence of technology he observes: "What man really does through the use of technology is not transform nature, but transform *human nature*;

Fifthly, American culture and life has been marked deeply and indelibly by those struggles of life and death that are the wars in which America has engaged. The American war of independence has been called a conservative revolution because it sought more to preserve a certain way of life than to overthrow one. It was concerned to preserve rights which were said to come not from the state but from God. It sought therefore to develop a sense of individual dignity and equality. And in the time of that war and the years immediately following it, America experienced the strength of united action. In the following century the war between the states was a severe test of the spirit of the American Revolution, a test of unity, equality and liberty. With the 20th century and the two world wars in the first half of that century, America clearly emerged as a world power, one whose influence is to be felt everywhere. America's involvement in Korea manifested her special position of leadership in the West. The Vietnam conflict began perhaps in this same spirit but it has raised severe questions about national purpose and has become the most divisive event in our history since the Civil War.

Finally we must note the peculiar dimensions of religion in American life. This has been characterized by a multiplicity of traditions, not merely of Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews, but within each of these there have been notable divergences and varieties of approach, some stemming from the national origin of the groups involved, some springing up within the opportunities and varieties of American life itself. Pluralism, voluntarism, pietism, and a certain secular involvement have marked much of America's religious life.⁸ These then are some of the important factors which

the real effect of technology is not the reconstruction of the world, but the reconstruction of human society. And this is its import for Christianity." "Pragmatic Science and Man," in *Projections: Shaping an American Theology for the Future*, p. 123.

In the same series of studies (*Projections*), Christopher Mooney speaks about the effects of science and technology on our experience of God: "Such changes in man's experience must necessarily also affect his experience of God, for he cannot be oriented toward the future by his whole culture and pulled toward the past by his religion; his concept of God cannot be relevant to his life if it is at odds with his society" ("Man and His Future," p. 33).

⁸ Various writers in *Religion in America* have called attention to these characteristics: "American religious liberty, voluntarism, and pluralism have

shape the distinctive American culture, and which lie at the root of the project for an American theology.⁹

Let us see then whether, from the consideration of the areas wherein theology is culturally conditioned and from the qualities of American life, we can have some understanding of what an American theology might be. To speak first of the American relationship to God; it is clear that if we could describe this adequately we would already have an American theology. Still, three things perhaps deserve special attention when we speak of this American faith. The first is the conviction of the blessing that God has given to us in our nation, in our resources, in our opportunities. This is expressed in the motto on the great seal of the United States, "*Annuit Coeptis*," "He has blessed our undertakings."¹⁰

created a new situation for both church and state" (Franklin H. Littell, "The Churches and the Body Politic," p. 37). "The most distinctive American contribution to Christianity has been the development of denominational pluralism . . ." (Bryan Wilson, "Religion and the Churches in Contemporary America," p. 73). "The voluntary principle has often been cited as the defining feature of American religion" (Edwin S. Gaustad, "America's Institutions of Faith," p. 124). "To be an American is to belong to a pietistic sect—similar to the situation of being a Jew in the Old Testament era" (William C. McLoughlin, "Is There a Third Force in Christendom?" p. 48).

⁹ Thomas F. O'Dea has noted the tension within religion created by these forces in American life: "Immigration and assimilation, westward expansion, industrialization and urbanization, the communications revolution, and the increasing democratization of education on all levels have all affected the American milieu. Each American religion seems at present to occupy its own half-way house in which defense of its traditions and its vested interests is found in short-term adjustment to a severe situation for which no final solutions are envisaged. The biographies of all Americans reflect the profound uneasiness of the religious communities" ("The Crisis of the Contemporary Religious Consciousness," in *Religion in America*, p. 190).

¹⁰ The sentiment expressed in this motto belongs to that broader aspect of American life that Robert Bellah calls American civil religion. He writes: ". . . Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion . . ." ("Civil Religion in America" in *Religion in America*, p. 5). It would seem that this religious phenomenon in America reflects and expresses much of America's distinctive relationship to God.

Secondly, there is the spirit of freedom which surrounds the relationship of man to God. The pursuit of freedom in religious matters helped draw many immigrants to this country. Within the United States religious attitudes and religious affiliations are all on a basis of voluntarism. There is nothing in the political or cultural life of the United States that compels anyone to profess a religious affiliation. This freedom is manifested in the great varieties of American religious expression and in the pluralism of the denominations. The freedom of man's relationship to God is embodied in the system of cooperative separatism whereby the political community and the religious community engage to help each other without interfering in the proper concerns of the other.

A third factor in America's relationship to God can be perhaps described best as a kind of corporate original sin. It is the negative aspect of our peculiar situation before God. We noted above the institution of slavery, and although the institution was abolished, the children of the slaves continued to live as second class citizens.¹¹ There have been failures to deal justly with the American Indians. Mexican Americans and other minority groups have found themselves discriminated against by the Anglo-Saxon majority. The fact that we individually are not responsible for this situation is not exactly the point. In various ways we, as a people, have supported and continue to support some forms of institutionalized injustice. To the extent that we know this and fail to do what is in our power to change it, we share in that guilt.

The questions that an American theology would be concerned about in seeking an understanding of our relationship to God are not questions simply of speculative understanding in an endeavor to achieve truths that might be contemplated and enjoyed in anticipation of heavenly beatitude. Rather they are questions of practical

¹¹ Abraham Lincoln, in his second *Inaugural Address*, expressed very movingly how slavery conditioned America's relationship to God: ". . . Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

understanding, questions that seek how to build, that ask how we can move forward the purposes of God, how we can develop our relationship to God, how we can seek to embody here the Kingdom of God.¹² H. Richard Niebuhr observed, "The idea of Kingdom of God has indeed been the dominant idea in American Christianity."¹³ Today this means also a practical ecumenical theology, a theology which seeks to build up the unity of the Christian community and ultimately the unity of all men who believe in God. American theological discussions then are subordinated to this unity, to a concern for how men may be made truly free before God, and how they may live in relations of mutual respect and enrichment.

The sources of evidence for a peculiarly American theology, besides the normal and primary sources of Scripture and tradition, would include the account of America's own religious history as well as the convictions of all men of good will.¹⁴ There would be an

¹² Langdon Gilkey notes this pragmatic quality of American theology: "Another way of describing this same characteristic is to point to the 'pragmatic' character of American religion and to the theological reflection stemming from it. If religion is an affair of the individual person, then its significance lies in what it does in the person's life—how it affects his character and behavior on the one hand, and his resultant attitudes toward life on the other. American theology has avoided purely theoretical issues and problems; its energies have been directed toward results, and these primarily in the ethical field. The creative theologians in America (Edwards excepted) have generally been ethicists: Gladden, Rauschenbusch, the Niebuhrs—and one may soon be able to add the present advocates of the "worldly gospels" ("Social and Intellectual Sources of Contemporary Protestant Theology in America," in *Religion in America*, p. 147). John Courtney Murray observed this combination of the theoretical and pragmatic as characteristic of what he called "the American Proposition": "The American Proposition is at once doctrinal and practical, a theorem and a problem. It is an affirmation and also an intention. It presents itself as a coherent structure of thought that lays claim to intellectual assent; it also presents itself as an organized political project that aims at historical success. Our Fathers asserted it and most ably argued it; they also undertook to 'work it out,' and they signally succeeded" (*We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, [New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960], p. vii).

¹³ *The Kingdom of God in America*, (New York: 1937), p. xii.

¹⁴ "These norms, in line with American pragmatism, require the tester to legitimate positions taken not, as in the past, by a proclamation of a bishop or even by a direct search of Scripture, but rather from the common-sense Christian judgment of people in whom the Holy Spirit works. Such a focus is related to the new analysis of how God works in history with special concern

endeavor to go beyond even Cardinal Newman's principle of consulting the faithful in matters of doctrine. For America would be inclined to consult not only the faithful but all men, even sincere atheists, to know what their attitudes toward the ultimate purpose of life might be, for in the dissatisfaction of sincere atheists, the man of faith can find a criticism and a challenge that he must measure up to. Seeking for evidence within the conviction and experiences of people supposes that the God who revealed himself through Jesus Christ continues to make himself known and to communicate himself to us today. That is why Christopher Mooney, in an essay concerning the future of American theology, writes, "What the theology of the future is ultimately asking then is not so much how the Christian today should speak about God (although this is obviously a problem), but how God, through Christ, now speaks to us."¹⁵

Next the American categories of understanding would be derived not primarily from some prevalent philosophy like linguistic analysis or even pragmatism, but rather from the ways in which the American people understand themselves, the world, and nature. From this point of view American theological categories will be secular categories and value categories. Langdon Gilkey has underscored the importance of speaking of the dimension of ultimacy in secular experience.¹⁶ A peculiar religious language no longer has meaning for the majority of American citizens. It is not a new religious language, but a religious use of secular language which must come to interpret America's relationship to God. Furthermore, the categories would be primarily value categories or operational categories, not simply speculative categories of understanding. Hence, theology would endeavor to interpret man's religious experience and commitment in terms of freedom, peace, justice, love, power. I would hesitate to exclude from an American theology all metaphysical categories. These do

for the presence of the Trinity where people are gathered and for the expression of the will of God through community members speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (Sister Marie Augusta Neal, "Catholicism in America," in *Religion in America*, p. 324).

¹⁵ "Man and His Future," in *Projections*, p. 34.

¹⁶ Cf. his *Naming the Whirlwind: the Renewal of God-Language* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), especially Part II, chapters 3 and 4: "The Dimension of Ultimacy in Secular Experience."

not seem to loom too large on our horizon at the present time, still we must ultimately have these as well, if our relationship to God is to be phrased in terms of genuine ultimacy. Perhaps Tillich, the Whiteheadians, and Herbert Richardson have given some indications of how this might be done.

Finally, with regard to the structural arrangement of an American theology, here we would expect questions of decision and effective change to dictate the order of consideration.¹⁷ There are, no doubt, many ways in which such a construction could be laid out. The point of departure might be from the experience of human need, from the sense of purpose which pervades the culture and the self-transcendence to which this calls us. For a theological structure it would be necessary to recognize that these goals are not merely of human devising but are a divine imperative experienced within history. Creation, redemption and the life of the Christian community would be seen then as movements toward these purposes. The life communicated to us by the Holy Spirit will be seen to flourish as those decisions are made that move us toward justice and peace and equality, toward a society of free men. This kind of theological arrangement has some similarity to theologies of hope that have developed in Europe in the last few years, but there is, I think, one significant difference. Whereas Moltmann, for example, sees the future standing in radical contradiction to the present and breaking into the course of history by reason of the promise of God, the American anticipation would be rather to see God now at work in the world, bringing

¹⁷ "Theologies grip us today only if they have the power to change our inner or outer worlds, to make them more worthy of human habitation" (Harvey Cox, "Political Theology for the United States; in *Projections*, p. 54). Sister Marie Augusta Neal sees here a special effect of America's religious and secular experience: "In this sense, the American Church will lead in the immediate future in realizing the implications of the work of the Council for the specific efforts to transform the world. The immediate dynamism of this thrust is part of the American experience. It comes from three characteristically American phenomena: the organizational facility which American technological advances have stimulated, the community quest that organizational facility generates in reaction to the anonymity-creating character of bureaucracy, and the emergence of the American Church from its separatist character as old defenses become obsolete through the decline of minority status. Although the themes are mainly European in origin, realization of them is American in form" ("Catholicism in America," in *Religion in America*, pp. 330-331).

about, through the decisions which men make in dependence upon him, the goals toward which history is moving.¹⁸ This is no Pelagian confidence in human effort but a reliance upon the effective "power of God at work in those who believe,"¹⁹ just as it raised Jesus from the dead and continues to pour out upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We can say by way of summary that an American theology, the search for an understanding of man's relationship to God that has been influenced by the American history, culture, and experience, would be dominated by the need to make effective, responsible, free decisions.²⁰ It would see the basic *relationship of God and man* as rooted in a divine summons to work for the building of genuine human community through participation in the divine community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It would see man's response to this summons manifested in love and a thirst for justice among men. The *questions* would concern first of all our goals, our hope for the future, our growth toward the fulness of God's life among men; and then they would concern the most effective ways to pursue these goals and to realize this hope in dependence upon the activity of God. The *evidence* for answering these questions would be found in our past, both as Christians and as Americans, and also in the signs of the times, in the deep persuasions and convictions of men of good will as they endeavor to work toward truly human and divine purposes. Our *understanding* of the answers would be primarily in terms of human dignity, liberty, equality and community. This experience of human existence would be the primary analogue for understanding God and God's activity among us. This, after all, is basically

¹⁸ "It is faith which enables us to catch the inner unity of God's promises given through the Old and New Testaments. But the life of Jesus is more than an event of promise; it means that grace, justification, and salvation are given to man in the present. Only insofar as man *actually* possesses these, can he have hope in God's future promise. In both Moltmann and Pannenberg we find a tendency to limit this existential aspect of soteriology, whereas in fact there is no reason at all for them to do so" (Christopher F. Mooney, *art. cit.*, pp. 46-47).

¹⁹ Cf. *Eph.* 1:19.

²⁰ "The bias of American theology, left to itself, is toward ethics and activism" (Michael Novak, "Christianity: Renewed or Slowly Abandoned," in *Religion in America*, p. 397).

biblical; for John tells us in his first letter, "He who loves is born of God and knows God and he who does not love does not know God for God is love."²¹ Finally, the *theological structure* itself would be ordered as a plan for changing and developing human life, a way to implement God's purpose and establish His Kingdom and to make the whole human family one in its pursuit of goodness and truth and peace and justice and equality. The enterprise of American theology is not to be undertaken in self-sufficient isolation from the rest of the world but in a humble and grateful acknowledgment of how much we have received and in a desire, then, to share with all those to whom we are indebted, the gifts that God has given to us.

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²¹ *1 Jn.* 4:7-8.