A RESPONSE TO "THE MEANING AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AMERICAN THEOLOGY"

I trust that this distinguished audience will agree that Father Wright has honored us with a paper that is both comprehensive and highly nuanced. For those of you, like myself, who have followed Father Wright's work over the years, especially his work on the doctrine of providence, I suspect that you will also agree that the present paper represents a new and most promising direction in his thought. My comments this morning, then, may be taken as attempts to clarify and, I hope, to encourage that direction.

I shall, therefore, spend the brief time allotted to me to raise two principal questions to this paper which, in my judgment, do call for at least clarification and perhaps revision. These two principal questions, happily enough, are in fact addressed to what I understand to be the two principal foci of this paper itself: first, the *nature* of an "American theology" *as theology;* second, the *nature* of the specific characteristics to which Father Wright has directed our common attention for developing an American theology.

I. The Nature of American Theology as Theology: A Question

My first question, then, is principally a question of calling for some clarification of the exact *theological* status we should assign the position developed by Father Wright. However, it may first prove helpful to state that I, at least, feel no hesitation in clearly affirming this position as an authentically theological one. Indeed, the nuanced and, I believe, sound appeal to Anselm's *fides quarens intellectum,* the careful delineation of the "elements" of theology, the steady application of these "elements" to certain aspects of the American experience clearly express an authentically theological analysis. However, I do remain puzzled when I try to determine exactly which theological discipline this position represents. My

puzzlement might be articulated as follows: are we to understand the concept "American theology" as Father Wright employs it, as a concept proper to the discipline labelled a "theology of culture" or rather to the discipline called a "fundamental or foundational theology"? This question is not, I hold, a minor one. For I find the concept "American theology" a genuine concern of a theology of culture or of communication insofar as the *chief* criterion for such a theology is its *meaning* in relationship to the lived experiences of particular cultural, social and individual situations. This is, I believe, the sense of the meaning of the concept "theology," for example, emphasized in Tillich's theology of culture as distinct from his systematics, or in much of Rahner's "pastoral" concerns, as distinct from his formal-fundamental theology. Hence, as a theology of culture, the concept "American theology" not only is intelligible but, as Professor Wright quite correctly insists, should be an important concern for all American theologians.

However, the delineation of the aspects of theology as a whole in this paper—and the paper's silence upon the exact theological status of these aspects—leads me to wonder whether another meaning is not also implied by this paper. That other meaning would be that American theology as faithful to the lived experience of various American cultural situations also provides a solution to the radical problematic of theology itself, that is, to that set of problems encompassed by the concept "fundamental theology." If such a claim is in fact implied, as it often is, in discussions of "American theology," then I, for one, must enter a *caveat* at this point. Briefly stated, then, the difficulty is this: I believe it is fair to state that the problem of historical consciousness is *the* problem which any contemporary theology must eventually face—especially since that time consciousness renders problematic the traditional trans-historical claims of theology and its traditional conversation partner, philosophy. Indeed, this is so even, as Professor Sittler's paper shows us, for the formerly space-, not time-conscious Americans. If this is in fact the case, then *any* cultural theology (German, Dutch, North American or Latin American) does not provide its own theological warrants! Rather, all such historically conscious theologies of culture can—and, I believe, should—intensify not cloud that conscious-

ness of one's own time-situated status and thereby intensify the recognition of the need for a theological discipline that truly explicates and systematically investigates that question. Of course, this fundamental discipline, too—as employed, for example, by Karl Rahner or our own native process theologians—is itself clearly related to and embedded in its own history. However, such a discipline *also* can show—ordinarily, and I believe correctly through philosophical resources—that religious, philosophical and therefore theological meanings involve an authentically trans-historical dimension. In a word, such a fundamental theology attempts to be self-authenticating in a manner and at a level which no theology of culture can properly explicate.

More specifically I suggest that not only is it true, as Father Wright suggests, that foundational theologians must become more conscious of their own historical roots (here American). But it is also true that all theologians of culture (again, here American) should become more conscious of the strictly theological foundation which their discipline needs to render it not merely culturally effective but—if I may employ that abused word—true. And precisely such an insistence, I find, seems to be curiously absent from the present paper. Hence, the reason for the present question is no more than a call to Father Wright to explicate that question with the same fine sensibility with which he has already articulated what he labels the five elements of an American theology of culture.

II. On the American Experience: A Plea for Negativity

My second question to this paper is more a plea for expansion and perhaps revision than it is for clarification. For Father Wright's description of the major positive aspects of the American experience strikes me, at least, as both clear and sound. It is also true that at some points—most graphically when he mentions a "corporate original sin"—he also delineates the negative counterpart of particular positive factors. My present concern, then, is to suggest that the occasional negative factors which Father Wright describes be expanded into fundamental and systematic principles of interpretation for the "American experience." If I may employ a not very American concept here, my second concern is really to try to force

a more dialectical understanding of the character of American experience itself and especially of American religious experience. Indeed, I believe that such a dialectical character has been shown to be a fundamental aspect of all religious experience by contemporary phenomenologists of religion. For the moment, however, I will confine myself to suggesting how that factor might operate in relationship to the quite specific and quite positive aspects of the American experience to which Father Wright has addressed our attention. First, the "land" itself. Surely the positive characteristics which Father Wright emphasized in his description of American "land-consciousness"—namely, the expansion of freedom, equality and individual initiative—which American consciousness of space made possible strikes most students of the American experience as true. But are Americans not today conscious, as Professor Sittler, for example, reminds us, of the enormously negative—not to say evil—consequences of our past aggressive conquest of the land and our present terrifying misuse of that land? Such consciousness, I suggest, is relevant to the present example of American land-consciousness and its resultant advance of individual freedom insofar as we become far more aware of the evil which our much vaunted frontier freedom has wrought. And it is primarily such dialetical consciousness which is, I believe, of greatest value for adequate reflection upon the present American religious experience.

In a similar vein, Professor Wright does delineate how the American spirit has produced both institutions of liberation and of oppression. Still he seems to consider the fruits of such oppression as affecting principally the slaves, the minorities, the oppressed of our culture. Yet surely we need not turn only to Hegel to realize the inexorable logic of the master-slave dialectic implied in this insight as the enslaving consequences of that dialectic fall principally not upon the oppressed but upon the masters. In our own culture, the black revolution, among others, has recently taught us this same lesson in a way that we have yet to recognize fully. Ambiguity and dialectics, I suggest, are no longer an import from the Europeans. We are now so sated with ambiguity that even Hegel and, possibly, even Sartre would hesitate to explicate the exact dialectics of our actual situation. I suspect that my second point is sufficiently clear:

each one of the aspects or characteristics of American experience outlined by Father Wright can be shown to have a dialectical counterpart of a highly negative character: the American conviction of blessing also involves a self-righteousness and a curiously destructive innocence whose consequences can be and have been disastrous; freedom in religious matters *also* implies a temptation to a merely cultural religion; our position as a world power has involved us almost inevitably in an economic exploitation of third-world countries; our own conservative revolution has been followed by wars which no longer make most of us proud of our "manifest destiny"—the Indian wars, the Mexican war, and, of course, as I trust we need hardly remind ourselves, Vietnam.

In a word, the American experience may indeed be unique but it is—as Father Wright's category "a kind of corporate original sin" reminds us but too gently—as ridden with ambiguity as any other people's. Indeed, at the moment precisely because of our American power *and* because of our sudden and still unwelcome consciousness of our limits and even—to be explicitly theological—of our sins, the American experience seems to me at least more ambiguous than most and surely more complex.

In conclusion, I trust that the constructive insights which Father Wright has presented for us and the welcome caveats which Professor Sittler has advanced may stir some among us to join their enterprise to see if, in fact, my own perhaps too bleak outlook upon our present American experience may prove short-sighted. For actually I do hope that such in fact may prove to be the case—at which time my present negations themselves may be dialectically negated by the far more positive and thereby perhaps far more American (or at least, for a New Yorker like myself, far more Californian) outlook on the American situation by Father Wright.

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