

A RESPONSE TO CHARLES DAVIS

Professor Davis's paper is provocative. It invites response at many levels. Under other circumstances it might be appropriate to explore the presuppositions of this paper concerning the issues of the nature of theology and theological method. However, Professor Davis made a public presentation of his methodological concerns before the American Academy of Religion this past year. So it will not be my purpose to deal here with the issues raised in that earlier paper "Toward a Critical Theology."¹

I am in basic agreement with that earlier discussion of the need for critical examination of all the religious traditions in their full complexity of particular myth, symbols, rituals, mystical techniques, doctrinal beliefs, and normative behaviors. I find no reason to contest Professor Davis's judgment that the traditions we receive are not only places of truth and freedom but also places of untruth and unfreedom. I agree that it is part of the theological task to discriminate within the living tradition. This need for discrimination leads to the hermeneutical task.

The role of creative imagination in the development of the classical worldview and classical christology is a second area that invites response. I want to cite only two elements in his brief exploration of christology that I find both significant and constructive for this group of theologians. First, I agree with Professor Davis that the Christian people and the theological community among them have no choice but to risk raising again the basic hermeneutical question: how does the Christ story refer to the world in which we live? All but a few of us have long outgrown that world in which classical christology was generated, a dualistic world which distinguished and prioritized between things cognitive and things affective, things spiritual and things material, the male and the female, a world which absolutized its distinctions with talk of the essences of things and then exalted and diminished ordinary human beings accordingly.

Secondly, I believe Davis offers the community of Christian believers and Catholic theologians among them strong validation for participating in this work of questioning our entire religious enterprise. Nothing less than the authority of the Lord Jesus

¹ The paper is printed in the 1975 *Proceedings* of the Philosophy of Religion and Theology section of the American Academy of Religion, compiled by James Wm. McClendon, Jr., pp. 213-29.

himself could authorize most of the leadership and the membership of the Church willingly to subvert the classical Christian account of things for the sake of the new world struggling to be born. By placing the center of meaning in Jesus as the parable of God, Davis makes it possible to comprehend from within the Christian tradition what is at issue religiously. Jesus as the parable of God continues to command allegiance as the full and perfect of revelation of the living God. God is revealed anew as the one who subverts the religious world to call humanity to faith, to truth, and to freedom.

As important as these issues are, I am going to leave them aside. The focus of my remarks will be directed to the closing section of Professor Davis's paper, what he has designed simply as "points for reflection." I take as my starting point his concluding judgment that the two elements most in need of renewal within the Christian religious tradition at this time are first, the acceptance of human autonomy, freedom, and creativity against the smothering of these in a sacral order; and second, the acceptance of inclusive rather than exclusive sacred images in their relationship to the plurality of human culture.

The smothering of human beings, male and female, in a sacral order is the issue which must be of prime concern to the theological community. The raw data for theological reflection on this matter is all around. Perhaps the most powerful poetic expression of the situation is to be found in Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck."²

Raw data for theological reflection shouts to me in two areas of religious behavior which currently engage me academically. I see the sacrally sanctioned smothering of human beings and I see resistance to suffocation in the current efforts of adult women—Christians, Jews, Muslims—to deal critically and creatively with the received religious traditions. I see the ominous power in Catholic Christianity for the smothering of human beings in the name of a sacral order in each celebration of the Church's liturgy. In the name of divine law, these rites continue to propose as normative a set of human and cosmic relationships which restrict both truth and freedom. I see resistance to this purported sacral order and the reopening of the quest for ultimacy in the groping to find new ways to come together, new ways of interacting within worship, ways that affirm human freedom, autonomy, creativity,

²Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* (New York: Norton, 1973).

and also interdependence. And in these same settings I see the attempts to impede the religious question and to maintain unquestioned the received order of things.

My response to these matters comes from the perspective of a believer who acknowledges and takes seriously the power of the transcendent which we name God to disrupt and to redeem the world of religion. And so I share Professor Davis's concern that religious people will reinforce the narrow positivism of our world and that we will contribute to our own destruction for lack of imagination.

If these currents of unrest provide the raw data, the contemporary American poet Adrienne Rich gives powerful poetic expression to the religious situation in which we of the Western world find ourselves at the end of the twentieth century. Using the metaphor of shipwreck and scavanging, she calls us back down into the primordial waters to try to recover the beginnings. She concludes:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who finds our way
back to this scene
carrying as knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

Poet and theologian concur in their identification of the theological issue for contemporary Christianity—the issue of the person, autonomous and free. Unless and until Catholic spirituality and ecclesiology develop through more profound reflection on the mystery of persons and order within the church, “We are, I am, you are . . . carrying . . . a book of myths in which our names do not appear.”

It is this issue of the struggle to affirm autonomy, freedom, and creativity within Catholic Christianity that I want to consider further. I want to consider the work of creative imagination in relation to my own study of liturgical history, liturgical theology, and liturgical practice. I believe liturgy is a major arena in which the dramatic conflict of the death and birth of religious world is already being played out.

Liturgy grows out of the creative imagination of a community at particular moments in its history. It provides the widest possible scope for dealing symbolically with the depth level of human

experience. In liturgical rites believers act out in a condensed symbolic way what they believe to be the ultimate truth of things. Liturgy expresses religious experience and the sense of the sacred among a people through symbolic forms readily available, but not too conscious to them.

Inherent in any form of liturgical action is a proclamation about a sacral order which not only invites but demands assent from participants in the rites. Each liturgical event celebrated in the Catholic Church makes multiple, pre-conscious statements about who I am, who you are, and how we are related to one another in this world by God, for God's sake.³ When some possibilities for genuine self-disclosure are categorically prohibited, it is not only truth and freedom that suffer. The religious institution becomes increasingly estranged from the religious experience of its own membership.

As-yet-unpublished research done recently for the Liturgical Conference indicates that fully two-thirds of the parishes of this country say that the source of liturgical dissatisfaction among their membership is "people's problems with the church" and "serious problems of faith among the people." It would be worth pursuing the data to determine the level of congruence—how many respondents designated both those factors. It is perfectly comprehensible to a student of religious ritual that adults who find themselves smothered and their basic life experiences denied in the name of a divinely ordained scheme of things will attend liturgical events less frequently and enter into them with limited enthusiasm.

Resistance to Roman Catholic liturgy at this moment in the Church's history is only symptomatic of the much larger question to which Professor Davis's paper has directed attention. The received sacral order continues to lose power rapidly—too rapidly for some, not rapidly enough for others. Only the creative imagination within the community can generate the appropriate theological and ritual symbols for expressing a new religious sensibility which speaks simultaneously of autonomy and interdependence.

Here the American Catholic theological community is challenged. Here the American Catholic theological community has an opportunity to articulate rising religious consciousness in terms comprehensible to the rest of the Roman Catholic world. The

³For example, see my essay on the state of the communion rite in *Liturgy*, February, 1976, pp. 61-2 and the response in the journal's membership forum in May, 1976.

Catholic Church of the United States can rightly be proud of its contribution to the Second Vatican Council, namely its coherent exposition of the principle of religious liberty drawn from its civic experience—"the right of the person and communities to social and civil liberty in religious matters."⁴ Can the American Catholic theological community begin now to thematize theologically "the right of the person and communities" to autonomy, freedom, and creative response in religious matters?

Since ritual action is a public forum in which a sacral order is asserted, it is inevitable that it is in this forum that the experience of adult believers will confront the coercive elements of the waning sacral order. The older relationships which are suffocating can be negated only through passive resistance or through the affirmation of a new reality.

Professor Davis makes a quite important point when he says that our sacred forms exist and function within the world and that they are subject, even as sacred realities expressing transcendent power, to empirical investigation. On the basis of patterns of symbolic development within a community that have been uncovered by cultural anthropologists, we can point to some discernible dynamics already operating, if not yet thematized, within the Church as it searches to express its sacred mystery in fuller ways.

We can anticipate, for example, that creative imagination will turn first toward ritual symbolization of the new world of religious meaning and that ritual development will precede and anticipate as well as accompany theological conceptualization of it. The studies of cognition by Gregory Bateson suggest that the first thematization of new group consciousness will be expressed in non-discursive ways. Bateson proposes that this is the case because ritualization provides more easily for balancing the complexity of communication about relationships than does verbalization.⁵

Ritualization of new consciousness has other predictable characteristics. Anthropologists note that one common way in which religious imagination generates new expressive forms is to juxtapose in unexpected ways forms and patterns already available from within the religious tradition. In this way the old order is "coherently deformed." Furthermore, it is likely that creative transformation will first occur at the margins of institutionally

⁴From the subtitle to the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, Second Vatican Council, 1965.

⁵Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972).

approved forms, and only slowly permeate them. Ritual play at the margins expresses ultimate seriousness for the creative imagination in the world of religion.

In his final point, the need for the acceptance of inclusive rather than exclusive sacred images in their relationship to the plurality of human culture, Professor Davis seems to be speaking of more than the organic expansion of the particular religious traditions, Christianity among them. He seems to be inviting the religious community and its theologians to openness to as-yet-unimagined possibility. What might that mean?

Cultural anthropologist Raymond Firth has explored the pattern of the emergence of new symbolic forms.⁶ All expressive forms, whether verbal or non-verbal, have their origins in biological, cultural, social, historical, or cosmic facts which become metaphors. All such forms remain private images to the degree that their meaning is not yet widely available in a community. They enjoy the possibility of becoming public forms to the degree that they can thematize—order, make intelligible, and commend—the depth experiences of ordinary women and men.

On first reflection, it might seem that the greatest obstacles to metaphorical inclusiveness might come from those expressive forms and images which have their origins in particular historical, cultural, and social facts which are of necessity accessible only to particular segments of humanity. The theologian might be tempted to search for images of the sacred which are inclusive by focusing on biological and cosmic metaphors that are within the realm of experience of all peoples.

Professor Davis suggests a more provocative alternative. The necessity of particularity and the possibility of the transcendence of all given worlds is itself the greatest historical, cultural, and social fact emerging in the human consciousness of this era. It has yet to be appropriated positively for the religious consciousness. Professor Davis suggests a way to make that fact sacred in the name of the Lord Jesus, the parable of God. The retelling of the classical Christ story and the development of ecclesiology to incorporate that religious sensibility has hardly begun.

Meanwhile, this realization of the ultimate mystery of transcendence, of what Professor Davis calls positive nothingness, is being acted out in the Church even before it has been thematized

⁶Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

theologically. If the Church can learn to live comfortably within a new sacral order that affirms autonomous freedom, interdependence, and creative transcendence in the name of Jesus it will indeed commend itself as the bearer of good news in a world of mass culture and political collectives. Christianity may yet have a central and decisive word to speak in world history. American Catholic theologians may yet shape that word to the world if the American Church can believe in, live with, institutionalize, and reflect creatively on the religious meaning of its milieu of personal freedom. There is no segment of the Catholic Church better endowed by life experience to take up the task at once.

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This passage and the rest of the thesis, of course, a decisive advance in the nature of revelation, but it is the surely will be subject and next systematic consideration. To this task of continuing reflection the seminar on Foundations invites us, for it has been organized around the theme: How God "Speaks" and "Acts" in Human History. It thus presupposes the doctrine of Vatican II in its acceptance of the fact and challenges to further theological reflection in its consideration of the new.

Now I would hold that the elements of a fuller and more systematic understanding are already at hand in the passage quoted above. I shall, therefore, seek to draw them out by firstly formulating the thesis, and then undertaking four problems in effect to elucidate its meaning and implications. The thesis reads: *God speaks and acts in human history through the transformation and spiritual purification of persons.*

My first probe of the thesis, I mean, the use of the word "God." It has become commonplace to insist that, in the present cultural context, the theologian cannot take for granted the meaningfulness of God-language. Hence, the theological need is foundations to clarify in explicit fashion the referent intended. In this regard I had a real unity of concern which links the different enterprises of a Peter Berger (*A Rumor of Angels*), a Lonergan Gikley (*Nature the Philosopher*), a Bernard Lonergan (*Method in Theology*), and a David Tracy (*Discordant Raps for Order*). Indeed, if one accepts, as I do, that a new cultural context requires the establishing of the theological endeavor upon new foundations,

¹Abbott 227n. 22