

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

### CHRISTIAN PANENTHEISM: ORTHOPRAXIS AND GOD'S ACTION IN HISTORY

"The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to men" (Psalm 115:16). The contemporary mood in theology is one of strong and seemingly irreversible emphasis upon orthopraxis, one that may well bode a sea change in the future. The conclusion to the theme we have been exploring throughout this convention is that Christian orthopraxis is indeed the well-spring whence there emerges new meaning in theology. If theory (to which faith belongs as *fides quae*) precedes faith in the sense that the Word of God precedes our acting in creative conformity to it, and if praxis as such can never be the grounds for the truth of a theory,<sup>1</sup> still Christian faith is always ordered intrinsically to action and the latter safeguards orthodoxy from collapsing into mere ideology.

This puts the focus sharply upon the acting human subject, and raises a problem concerning the trans-subjective dimension to orthopraxis. The problem can be stated this way: Does God act in our history in such wise that orthopraxis is the living out of God's initiatives in history, and so in an historical way? Religion affects the direction things take, but is God himself a factor? Christians believe he is—both in Jesus and in the Spirit—but it can be said that Jesus has disappeared from the horizon of present life and the activity of the Spirit is anonymous and ambiguous. Again, is God active only in these specific events, or does he show his hand in the unfolding of universal history? Is it possible any longer, after several holocausts, to discern the presence of God in universal human progress? Can such progress truly be growth towards the Kingdom?

Put differently, are the strivings after genuine value of historical men and women (and historicity surely gives Christianity identity among the religions) autonomous achievements? Or do they derive from God, receiving from him their impetus and identity? If the former be true, then our free decisions seemingly contribute to the self-creation of God (as long as one avoids thinking atheistically). If it is rather the latter that is true, then is not the contemporary meaning of human freedom compromised? Modern historical consciousness views freedom in terms of genuinely creative initiatives which cannot be reduced to the mere implementation of what has been foreordained. Freedom as the matrix of history cannot mean only that what eventuates does so in a spontaneous and non-coercive way. Rather it allows that men and

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde once observed that the fact that someone dies for a cause is no proof of the truthfulness and goodness of that cause.

women are originating sources of novelty, responsible for the making of themselves and of their world.

Is it possible to walk the razor's edge of this dilemma and suggest both (1) that our Christian acting springs from a freedom that is without divine antecedent determinations and so is a genuine self-positing in which human persons living in society determine their own futures both in this life and in the eschaton to come; and (2) that God himself, remaining the ground of that freedom and its exercise, does not become thereby a God *of* history but remains transcendent to and intrinsically unaltered by what man makes of himself and his history? This is only to ask if the sole motive for God's acting in the world, creatively and redemptively, is to be sought in the divine reality itself, or if the creature makes determining contributions to such divine activity.

Precisely from within what we experience as the free historicity of our existence there appears a dimension of ultimacy that cries out for religious symbolization. Such spontaneous symbols, at least negatively and covertly, implicate God.<sup>2</sup> And in so doing they echo the constant language of both the Old and the New Testament concerning a God ever active in the affairs of men. To recognize that language as mythological is only to set the further theological task of seeking to discover whether such myth and symbol can be translated into ontological categories.

A first appeal for help can be made to Langdon Gilkey who writes that "we experience ultimacy not as the all-powerful, extrinsic and necessitating ordainer of what we are and do [indeed this runs counter to almost every facet of the modern consciousness of history] but precisely as the condition and possibility, the ground of our contingent existence, our creativity, our eros and meaning, our intellectual judgments, our free moral decisions and our intentional actions."<sup>3</sup> Here the category of "cause" (from Aristotelian realism) has given way to the less precise but more flexible category of "ground" (from German idealism). Still, it functions to explain that God both preserves the structures of the past and establishes new forms of life that break continuity with the old. More to the point, the term "ground" does this by presenting God as acting, not as an autonomous agent alongside other agents but "in and through the ordinary creative and destructive actions of men in history."<sup>4</sup>

But does not this run the risk of dismissing God as a superfluous hypothesis, useful only as an explanatory device? God seems suddenly deprived of his deity. All talk of divine providence, election, and predestination, for instance, either disappears from theology entirely or is watered down to a very thin gruel—when, as in process theology, God is conceived as a metaphysical structural principle of the universe, as in Whitehead's phrase "the great companion, the fellow sufferer who understands."<sup>5</sup> Is there not in all this the collapse of theology into

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

<sup>3</sup>Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 247.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press Edition, 1969), p. 413.

religious anthropology, with the suggestion that the phrase "God is love" really means "love is God"? Or, in terms of Wittgenstein's language games, that the expression "God loves us" does not describe some objective state of affairs but creates the very reality to which the utterance gives expression, and means when deciphered that "our humanness calls us to love one another"? Surely our Christian symbols seek to say more than this. Namely, that God is at the very origin of our freedom in such wise that he is not only Love but Power as well, Alpha and Omega, not only the ground of being but himself *the* transcendent Being.

Pannenberg's thought moves in this direction by defining God as "the power over all that is" (*Macht uber alles*). But to avoid any return to notions of a fore-ordaining sovereign, he identifies divine power with futurity—futurity is the mode of divine being. This enables God to determine all events not from outside history, not from "above" it as it were, but from within history itself, yet after the fashion in which the future as it occurs determines what preceded it, altering the meaning of the past without violence to the historical process itself. "God is revealed then not as the unchangeable ultimate ground of the phenomenal order, but as the free origin of the contingent events of the world."<sup>6</sup> But this maneuver does seem in the final analysis to historicize God in the sense of relating him intrinsically to history. Or perhaps, viewed the other way around, it ontologizes history. What Pannenberg calls God's eternity is closer in fact to what Heidegger and Schubert Ogden call "primal temporality." He (Pannenberg) interprets Rahner's phrase that God changes "in the other" to mean logically that he changes in himself. At the same time he appears to distance himself from the Whiteheadians in speaking not of the *Deus in se* but of the God whose deity is identical with his coming rule.

Apart from the peculiarity of equating the past with darkness and sin, and the future with light, hope and salvation, the further question can be raised as to whether this does not functionalize the idea of God. God is defined in function of man and his history; he is man's absolute future. Like all functional ideas of God, this lends itself to replacement by equivalents.

Still and all, it is untoward to view the being of God as contesting genuine human freedom. Are we left then only with the alternative of Fichte who contends that seeking to ground finite freedom, to conceive it as other than autonomous, is quite simply contradictory?<sup>7</sup> It is possi-

<sup>6</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. by L. L. Wilkins and A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, trans. by G. Green (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 53. Fichte, while allowing that finite freedom is subject to partial determinations from the laws of nature, wishes to assert that manifest in the operations of the finite ego, is the truth that ultimately "... everything flows from the absolute liberty in its act of discursive self-realization" (*Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present*, ed. by E. Gilson, T. Langan and A. Maurer [New York: Random House, 1962], p. 11). Things-in-themselves are thus creations of consciousness; only a doctrine of the universality of mind safeguards this against mere subjectivism. Representa-

ble to focus the question more sharply by reflecting on two contemporary and viable explanations that make the most impressive claims to challenge Fichte's conclusions. One is more variant upon the panentheism of Hegel. For Hegel, all history is the self-manifestation of God to man. Even for so orthodox a Catholic thinker as Rahner, this man Jesus is the auto-expression of God. Things and events are for Hegel the finite appearances of Spirit; thus (without denying their genuine reality as other than God) their true being is to be found in God.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the infinite and the finite are necessary to one another, otherwise the infinitude of God is merely a rational extrapolation from finite spirit's transcending of its own limitations—thus, the finite "re-presents" that of which the infinite is creative. Pure Being (*Esse Subsistens*, e.g.,) is a meaningless concept because without finite mediation it lacks all content. If religion "represents" man and God as distinct, philosophy surmounts this disjunction and "thinks" rather of "a single activity which can be described as 'human-divine.'" <sup>9</sup> What follows from this is that God's knowing is at once his revealing and his being known by men and women in the act of faith, as it not only seeks but attains understanding.<sup>10</sup>

The immediate objection to this is that it appears to do away with the autonomy of creatures; finite freedom appears as a mere epiphenomenon. What eventuates is not an historical transaction between God and man, something rooted in the contingencies of love that offers itself to faith, but rather a process that unfolds with logical necessity, that structures not faith but speculative thought.

At the same time it would be short-sighted to fail to note the positive contribution in the thought of Hegel, who thought through, more profoundly perhaps than anyone else, the paradoxical relationship between the infinite and the finite. What is illuminating is the intentionality of his thought over and above its strictly logical implications. His panentheism—if we interpret him benignly as circumventing the pantheism he himself wished to avoid—refuses to set the infinite and finite over against one another. His mistake was that of making their relationship one of mutual need. The Christian tradition on the contrary has always insisted that the sole motive for God's othering of himself in the creature lies in divinity itself, in the divine goodness as self-communicative by way of a love that is not Greek *eros* but New Testament *agape*. Classical theism, in its denial of what Aristotle meant by *real* relations on the part of God towards creatures, has been caricatured

tive of process thinkers on this point is Lewis S. Ford, "Can Freedom be Created?" *Horizons* 4, 2 (1977), 183-88.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Quentin Lauer, S.J., *Hegel's Idea of Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University, 1974), p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Emile L. Fackenheim, "Mythologizing the Jewish Experience," *The Impact of Belief*, ed. by G. F. McLean (Lancaster, Pa.: Concordia, 1974), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> This can be interpreted in a non-theistic way to mean that "revelation is Reason's gift to itself": cf. Denis J. M. Bradley, "Religious Faith and the Mediation of Being: the Hegelian Dilemma in Rahner's 'Hearers of the Word,'" *The Modern Schoolman* (January, 1978), p. 138; cf. also Emile Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1968), esp. p. 164.

as if this were a denial of *actual* relations, of the truth that God creates, knows, loves and saves the world. Whereas what the Aristotelian-Thomist teaching sought to preclude were only relations that were "real" in the sense of bespeaking ontological dependence. The way remains open then for relations on God's part that may be called "real" as long as they are understood as arising not out of divine need (*ex indigentia*) but out of divine super-abundance (*ex abundantia*).<sup>11</sup> Hegel understood that the infinite is not limited by the finite if it includes the latter; his error was in the kind of inclusion. All this need not be taken as a denial that God is affected by the triumphs and failures of his creatures, only that the affecting is not one to which he must submit by nature but rather one to which he opens himself in the mystery of love.

This brings us to the second challenge to Fichte's autonomous freedom—one worked out in Langdon Gilkey's attempt to translate the Christian symbols of election, providence, and predestination into the categories of Whitehead's thought. He does this, however, by taking one major liberty with Whitehead's system at the very beginning. He eschews the notion that God is in the grip of process as something transcendent to himself. The divine agency is not subordinated to creativity as the category of the ultimate that is non-actual in itself and instantiated somewhat differently in God and in creature. Rather, for Gilkey, divinity is itself ultimate and absolute, and all process is rooted in it. Genuine process does, nevertheless, mean the self-creating of the entities which constitute it, bespeaking genuine novelty in the world not derivable from God. Thus it means allowing (unlike Hegel) that the finite limits the divine, and indeed contributes in a determining way to the self-constitution of God in what process theologians call his "consequent" nature. For followers of Whitehead, God does not create our freedom but is rather a privileged participant in creative interactions between entities whose freedom is self-positing. God only shapes and molds that freedom as he lures it forward by providing relevant possibilities out of which it achieves its own actuality.

Gilkey radically alters this to where, conversely, God is the ground of all process, necessary to it yet not contingent within it. He is not a creature of process, arising out of a process of which he is not the ground. Nonetheless, he does participate in this process in his intrinsic beingness.<sup>12</sup> This is only to say that God, who is not limited by any absolute, transcendent to himself, chooses to limit himself by becoming the creative ground of entities that freely set the course of their own destinies. But this renders his being (for Gilkey) both subject to change in itself, and temporal rather than eternal.<sup>13</sup> God so conceived is able, for example, to know the free future, but only as possible, not as actual.

In Hegel's solution creaturely freedom loses that autonomy essential to it and history (including Christian history that grows out of

<sup>11</sup> A profound implication of this is that though God is affected by what arises from the creature he does not (as Pure Act) thereby acquire perfection previously lacking to him; cf. W. Norris Clark, S.J., *The Philosophical Approach to God* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University, 1979), p. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, pp. 306-10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 308-09.

orthopraxis) is characterized by the kind of inevitability that marks the logical process proper to reason and concept. Human freedom is the mere appearance of true freedom which is divine. In Gilkey's alternative, it is God's freedom that is compromised in the sense that its transcendence is relativized by the determination that comes from finite freedom—granting that this is only because God's loving omnipotence wills such self-limitation. If Hegel minimizes the distinction between God and man, Gilkey over-emphasizes the same distinction. For the former, the true being of the finite is really only a moment in the being of the infinite. For the latter, the finitude of human freedom cannot be real and taken seriously unless it is set over against the freedom of God in a way that limits it—even if making this to be ultimately a self-limitation is a way of rooting finite liberty in God.

Is there any way out of this dilemma, any other way in which the relationship between absolute freedom and finite freedom can be thought through? In suggesting that there is, I should like to begin by pointing out two characteristics shared in common by Hegelians and reformed process thinkers such as Gilkey. (1) First, both think upon God and world dialectically, that is to say in a way that is reductively univocal because essentialistic.<sup>14</sup> When God and creature are thought of as akin in essence, the consequence is a tendency to collapse one into the other—whether with the conceptual language of Hegel one un.masks human freedom as the moments of divine freedom, or with the symbolic language of Gilkey one anthropomorphizes and views divine freedom on the model of finite freedom. (2) Secondly, behind such thinking is the all-pervasive contemporary phenomenon of giving ontological priority to possibility over actuality. Here freedom is instinctively grasped as an unfulfilled capacity that faces out on limitless horizons of possibility, while actuality is a stricturing of such possibility to present achievement as a temporary stage of development. When such ontological priority is given to potentiality over actuality, to the future over the present, then God is not yet fully actual in his own being and process can no longer be movement towards a *telos* already actual in divine intentions. Pannenberg suggests as much in allowing that “in a restricted but important sense God does not yet exist.”<sup>15</sup> If he means something more than this, then he is covertly giving actuality to God and qualifying what he means in speaking of futurity as the mode of divine being.

The Hegelian denial of the principle of identity means understanding God's creative act as a divine “othering” of self in the creature—with therefore a certain inevitability attending both creation and Incarnation.<sup>16</sup> God cannot be *thought* of apart from the latter two events, even if he can be so *represented* religiously. But there is a different way of mediating between the infinite and the finite, or in the present context,

<sup>14</sup>For Hegelians, at any rate, the God of Christianity is conceived at the heart of a dialectic of Being wherein Infinite Spirit is real only in unity with finite human spirit.

<sup>15</sup>*Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. by R. J. Neuhaus (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 56.

<sup>16</sup>“God becomes man in order to become God”; Stanley Rosen, *G. W. G. Hegel, An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale, 1974), p. 234.

between Uncreated Freedom and creaturely freedom and praxis. This is by way of conceiving of them as constituting not a dialectical relationship but a community of analogy, wherein creatures participate in divine being conceived as existential act. Here the being and freedom of man is neither collapsed into God (Hegel) nor set over against it (Gilkey). Rather, the divine causality moves on a different level than ours entirely, a level creative of being in the strict sense (*ex nihilo*), so that God is not only the cause (in an ultimate and transcendent sense) of what eventuates but even of the very mode of its eventuation as free. The divine causality does not then withdraw from the scene (as it were) to let us be free, but explains ultimately that our freedom is genuine self-determination. In this sense, the greater the divine causality involved, the more autonomous is the effect produced. The closer God draws to the creature, the more it is set free for an open future—not, however, a future without God. From this it follows that we can only speak of God's action in our history analogically—that is, by using the contents of creaturely concepts from which we can at best designate God's action shrouded in mystery.

Man's plotting of his own history and destiny then, which does involve the introduction of genuine novelty into the world, is not really a question of a synergistic cooperation between God and man—indeed, that is to put the question falsely. A more illuminative approach to the problem is to understand with J. B. Metz that human freedom is not at bottom a matter of choice (*liber arbitrium*) but more radically is the very structure of human beingness.<sup>17</sup> To view our freedom in this transcendental sense is to obviate at the very beginning vexing questions concerning interrelationships between intellect and will. More to the point, it would appear to be a basis on which orthopraxis can have its full significance. For freedom, so conceived as mankind's mode of being in the world, is revelatory of who man is and what men and women are summoned to make of themselves. Such finite freedom can exist only "in" God (outside God there is only the Void); at the same time, it is in itself a creaturely self-positing which can come about only through a divine *kenosis*. God (so to speak) makes room "within himself" wherein the creature can constitute itself.<sup>18</sup> But this finite occurrence of freedom need not be seen as a moment of infinite freedom. It can be seen as a creation of divine love, whose being is rather given to it as its own. The love in question is not *eros* as divine self-enactment, but *agape* as divine self-giving. Then history is not a mirror image of what occurs eternally in the depths of the Godhead, even by way of the Trinitarian processions. It becomes something specifically human into which God can enter only by becoming himself a man among men, and so subjecting himself humanly to the historical process. Without being a God of history, he becomes a God in history. The history that issues creatively from our praxis is not able then to be subsumed under the aegis of rational

<sup>17</sup>Johannes B. Metz, "Freedom as a Threshold Problem Between Philosophy and Theology," *Philosophy Today* (Winter, 1966), pp. 264-79.

<sup>18</sup>St. Thomas' way of saying this observes that God contains the things in which he is said to exist: cf. *S. Theol.*, I, q.8, a. 1, ad 2.

thinking (as in Hegelianism). Rather, at least insofar as it is praxis measured by God's acting in history, it represents "the travails of an incarnate human spirit endeavoring to redeem the time."<sup>19</sup> This is a far cry from Descartes' attempt to disincarnate man's being, or Hume's alternative of fleeing historical knowledge on the grounds that all genuine knowledge arises from within subjectivity.

But such history is not mere human endeavor that transpires without God. First, because finite liberty is God's creation and thus a limited participation in the infinitely actual freedom of God as the power of self-determination. The latter, far from contesting human self-determination, actually makes it possible by endowing it with a creativity of its own. Precisely because finite freedom is anchored by inner necessity in the divine goodness as its origin and *telos*, it is set free to determine itself vis-à-vis all lesser goods. But secondly, every enactment of freedom is in fact a dialogue between God and man. Surely, when we read that God made man *ad imaginem Dei*, this means that he intended a dialogue to ensue. But this can be only if God enters history as a man among men. Not that the interior workings of grace are thereby voided but rather that such grace requires concrete content which is supplied by the events of history. These events center on Jesus who is the Christ of God, and whose Resurrection, as the earnest of ours to come, becomes the horizon of human history with God. These events perdure in the mode of proclamation and sacrament within the Church, gaining a new form of historical visibility thereby. Moreover, the Resurrection is simultaneously the sending of the Spirit upon the Church to inaugurate our history—which need not be looked upon merely as a prolongation of the Christ-event and so unchanging except in accidental ways, but can be seen as a movement set in motion by the Christ-event. It can add to the Christ-event in the sense of constituting unique historical appropriations of and responses to it. God's exchanges with men and women then occur not only through revelatory events of the past but through present responses to our on-going history, at once creative and destructive. Here, John Macquarrie's image comes to mind of God as a divine chess player whose wisdom and love controls the outcome of the game by countering, in the end, the ill-chosen moves of human beings.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, if the deity of God is to remain intact, it seems necessary to say that in all this God remains unaltered in his own beingness. In his infinite actuality he is not subordinated to the historical process itself (history and time are rather the creations of God)—not even (as Gilkey would have it) in a divine act of freely willing to be constituted in his consequent nature by the world. We do not contribute to the self-creation of God for the achievements of history are determinations not of God but of man himself. The import of this refusal to compromise and relativize God's transcendence is that it safeguards the

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Munson, "Freedom: A Philosophic Reflection on Spirituality," *Philosophy Today* (Spring, 1967), p. 52.

<sup>20</sup>John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1966), p. 225.



utter gratuity of grace. This precludes only that kind of pantheism which views God as in need of a world wherein he enacts himself; it insists that God's love for the world is truly altruistic—*agape* and not *eros*.

But how is this reconcilable with God's involvement with a world in travail? Only because—apart from having created finite freedom and set his own infinite goodness as its horizon—God has chosen to enter the temporal order as a man subject to history in his humanity; he who is ahistorical, who has no history of his own, has assumed a history—but *our* history. The theological explanation of this is ultimately Trinitarian. Catholic theology has always understood that when God enters history at the Incarnation, it is as person (in the Greek sense of hypostasis) not as nature; it is humanity that supplies the nature. This at least raises the question as to whether what is divine in Jesus is to be sought precisely in that dimension of his being whereby he is human. Edward Schillebeeckx circumvents the problem with the daring suggestion that all human persons as such are in and of the divine in the sense of being enhypostatic in God.<sup>21</sup> What is true is that, in the Christ-event, God does not manifest himself otherwise than in human form. This by no means need deny that many biblical expressions (those referring to Jesus' pre-existence, for example) may well be symbolic, and bear as their primary meaning God's immanence. It is only to suggest that, integrally taken, such symbols refer to the immanent Trinity even if (as Edmund Dobbin's address makes clear) they do so only through our participation in the immanence they represent. But this allows us to say that the divine nature as such, as the subsisting act of Be-ing, remains unaltered both in the ahistorical communication which is creation and in the historical self-communication that is salvation. This saving self-communication is the advent of God not in his deity, but in and through the concrete humanity of the man Jesus. In the thought of Aquinas, person or hypostasis in God is a pure subsisting relation, reducible to true immanent action which, however, is not causal in kind.<sup>22</sup> Persons, of course, do act causally but only through the natures which they personify in a process of ontological termination. This suggests that person belongs to an entirely different level of intelligibility than does a constituted essence; it conveys rather a continuing process of becoming, of creative self-positing, rooted in the pure relationality of self-revelation (knowledge) and self-donation (love). Thus, in willing to enter history in the mission of the Son, and then to animate the Church in her subsequent history in the mission of the Spirit, God chooses to interact with men and women in free dialogic partnership on the level of personhood as Father, Son and Spirit. He remains the Lord of history but by way of his creative adaptations to human responses (including the negative ones of malice and sin) to his own continuing initiatives of love.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. by H. Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 653.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *S. Theol.*, I, q. 29, a. 4; q. 27, a. 1. This distinguishes Aquinas from Eberhard Jungel's position that "God's being is in becoming"; cf. *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).

Still, our future is dependent upon what possibilities we actualize now. Even the precise character of our eschatological future may depend radically upon present human choices. That that future will be with God and consist of a beatific vision is merely a formal designation that says nothing of the concrete shape that such beatitude will assume. John Baptist Metz suggests the full implications of this when he writes that "even the dead, those already vanquished and forgotten, have a meaning which is as yet unrealized."<sup>23</sup> In our praxis then, as the deployment of our liberty under God, we are engaged in the process of transforming time into eternity (not escaping time into eternity). The phrase "life after death," then, may well be misleading (as recently pointed out by Nicholas Lash among others<sup>24</sup>); misleading because of the word "after" which suggests some kind of duration subsequent to cosmic time rather than the sublimation of our present time into eternity. Karl Rahner is closer to the mark in writing that "true human history constitutes its own definitive stage and is not merely rewarded with it."<sup>25</sup>

If all this be true then it is a precarious thing to be human; to be man or woman is a delicate undertaking. Man truly is, as Aquinas observes, a *minor mundus*, existing at the point where the temporal and the eternal intersect and converge.<sup>26</sup> The spiritual and the corporeal in him are so unified that he cannot (as Neo-Platonists wish) repudiate the lower in order to attain the higher. Aquinas claims this in insisting, for example, that the goodness of a virtuous action is intensified when it is executed with passion.<sup>27</sup> Man thus leads a dangerous existence as "he continuously moves on the frontier between truth and untruth, between freedom and constraint, between good and evil."<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusions

Are there any practical consequences to all of this for us? The import of this entire convention, of our common explorations, tells us that indeed there are. Christian truth, if more than personal commitment, is less than full truth without it. Orthopraxis can and should mean new awareness, new insight and understanding in theology. And such freshly minted truth cannot in its turn but spur us on to action.

It seems true, then, to say that the Christian believer may not rest content to face the future passively, content to contemplate it as it arrives, but is summoned to face it in terms of committed action, knowing that what lies ahead is of our own determining, our destiny to

<sup>23</sup>Johannes B. Metz, "The Future in the Memory of Suffering," *Concilium*, Vol. 76: *New Questions on God* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>24</sup>Nicholas Lash, "Eternal Life: Life 'After' Death," *Heythrop Journal* (July, 1978), pp. 271-84; A Reply to Lash by Brian Hebblethwaite appears in the same journal for January, 1979, pp. 57-64.

<sup>25</sup>Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the New Earth," *Theology Digest* (Winter, 1967), p. 281.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *II Sent.*, d.1, q.2, a.3.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *S. Theol.*, II-II, q.158, a.2, ad 1.

<sup>28</sup>Gerard Verbeke, "Man as a 'Frontier' According to Aquinas," *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, Series I, Studia V (Leuven: University Press; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), p. 223.

nurture well or to distort. We do this under parameters set by God, above all in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ. But this means that the future is not only a projection of our present capacities but an adventure with God whose continuing activity in our midst opens up horizons that fill us with hope.

This is no plea to repudiate the past; indeed it is more a plea to be genuinely true to that past by giving it a future in the present. Still, there is need for the risk of involvement, of venturing with faith into uncharted areas, into the wilderness, the dark wood. We can only add "amen" to these words of Robert McAfee Brown: "Let us be prepared to fail a few times, if only that we may persuade the suffering race of man that we desire to stand at their side, sharing their burdens, working on their behalf, bearing their cross."<sup>29</sup> If we believe that God is with us then the absence of God of which we hear so much should perhaps be looked upon as a cultural phenomenon that offers an opportunity to stress in new ways the hidden modes of God's acting in history, and the importance of not looking for God in those areas where he is not to be found. Put differently, perhaps this very absence can make us aware of God's own sovereign, undervived initiatives—the Spirit breathes where he will. With Heidegger perhaps we can await the call of the gods, the "grace of a better dawn."<sup>30</sup> Yet even now we can be already "on the way." In the end, only God himself assures us that he himself lies in wait for us at the end of all our striving. But already he has shown us his human face in the man Jesus, enabling us to believe that "God's cause has already been made the cause of man."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, "Ecumenism and the Secular Order," *Theology Digest* (Winter, 1967), p. 271.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. William J. Richardson, S.J., *Heidegger—Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), p. 641.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Schillebeeckx, *op. cit.*, e.g., pp. 62 and 670.