

## A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL J. HIMES

As I approached my task as respondent, I wondered, "Just what are we up to here?" The topic is "the signs of the times" but what, exactly, is the query that Dr. Himes has undertaken? I discovered, in both a letter from President-elect Jon Nilson and in the introduction to Dr. Himes's address, a quote to the effect that the first plenary should "consider the demands of a genuinely theological reading of the signs of the times." Then Dr. Himes put the question thus: "What are the theological presuppositions of a reading of the signs of the times?" It seems that we are definitely in the realm of the theological, rather than just a sociological or political reading of current events. So I sought to understand just what Dr. Himes considers to be (1) the *demands* of a theological reading of the signs of the times and (2) the *theological presuppositions* behind such a reading.

With regard to the latter—the theological presuppositions of reading the signs of the times, Dr. Himes has given us a rich set of reflections on the relationship between theology and history. This seems appropriate since one of the key issues of our generation (indeed, of the last two centuries) is just how to do theology once "historicity" is taken into account. The word "hermeneutics" has to be invoked here, and, in one of the more salient lines in his address, Dr. Himes says, "Thus the church is engaged in an ongoing hermeneutical act in which the text is the world." So we are involved here in trying to understand just how the church goes about a theological interpretation of the world for our generation.

Dr. Himes divides this question nicely into two further questions: Why should theology attend to history? And why does history need to be understood theologically?

In brief, his answer to the first question—Why should theology attend to history?—is that God has acted in history in the Incarnation. I would agree with this and note that two characteristics of Christianity make attention to the signs of the times constitutive of Christian theology. First, the heart of the gospel involves the in-breaking of God into history. This is most salient and central in the incarnation of Jesus, but it also has to do with our own incarnation. The point of the incarnation is to grant us the power to believe that God is manifest in us—even when the flesh is corruptible, even in the face of death. So we cannot appropriate the gospel, for ourselves or for the world, without confronting this sacramental mystery—without interpreting, understanding, and applying the mystery of being both finite and vessels of God's Spirit.

Secondly, Christianity is a missionary religion. Different gospel writers have different ways of narrating the move from resurrection to ascension to the advent of the Holy Spirit. But there is no doubt that the small band of disillusioned

women and men who had followed Jesus understood his resurrection to mean they had a mission. The healing, the transformation, the forgiveness, were not meant for themselves alone but for the wider salvation of the world. For this the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, was sent to aid them. But mission demands relevance. A religious message, no matter how inspiring, cannot meet its mark unless it grasps the hearts and minds of those to whom it is preached. And this means understanding the times, the places, the cultures, the desires and fears, not only of each succeeding generation, but of peoples in diverse cultural locations.

So, why does theology need history? I have only embellished what Dr. Himes has already pointed out—theology needs history, not instrumentally, as some adjunct to its central message, but *constitutively*. The heart of the gospel is a message about history and transformation. The mission of the Church is transformation and this requires it to be both historically astute and culturally sensitive. Theology and history would be separated only at the peril of losing the gospel altogether. Not reading the signs of the times is not an option.

Further, then, why does history need theology? This is a bit trickier, since many in our postmodern world consider theology an “add-on” to both science and history. But Dr. Himes makes the case that history, by its very nature, pushes us into theological questions. This is because history is not just a mechanical set of laws, nor the outworking of the unconditioned will of the individual. Rather, history involves a taut balance, between destiny and freedom, between actuality and possibility. This is true of history with a small “h” as well as History with a big ‘H’. We all have to struggle with the tension between our finitude and our ambition, our limitations and our unrestricted longings.

Such struggles are immensely complicated, as Dr. Himes points out, by the fact that this tension is itself distorted from the get-go. As he puts it, “destiny is experienced as fate and freedom as self-destructive.” Dr. Himes does not use the words “original sin” but the point is there in any case. We are born into a world in which we are subject to more evil than we ourselves have created. But then we contribute to the distortion by our own willfulness and intransigence.

The point is, one can't get very far in considering either biography, history, or herstory, without at least posing theological questions. What can possibly restore a healthy balance between limitation and transcendence (using Lonergan's terminology)? And what kind of deep or ultimate Desire can hold us in the taut balance that comes with incarnate life?

Dr. Himes alluded to two further fascinating points in this regard that I would like to highlight. He mentions that any talk about history will end up with categories that are broadly religious and may be mythological. The task of theology is to put some kind of control on a “language always straining toward the mythological.” This is an intriguing point to explore. What is the role of the “mythological”? Can we distinguish a (positive) role for myth in contrast to a (negative) use of magic or superstition? And just what sort of “control” is imagined here? I am sympathetic to the task, but the feminist streak in me makes

me ever suspicious of "control." A further exploration of the constructive role of the symbolic imagination is needed here.

Dr. Himes makes a second interesting point here, which is that the categories in a theology of history must be transformative. In other words, they must not only describe events but alter them. Again, I would invoke the centrality of mission in the Christian gospel. Theology may be an academic enterprise but it is in the service of mission and transformation.

So we have considered theological presuppositions. What are the *demands* for a theological reading of the signs of the times? What are the conditions that will make a genuine reading possible? Dr. Himes includes empathy, indeed insists that all interpretation of history requires empathy. He alludes to coherence and adequacy. He insists on dialogue and conversation, with a plurality of voices. This in turn assumes humility, and works to overcome any kind of triumphalism that might infect one's hermeneutics. Finally, Dr. Himes emphasizes that such "reading" must take place in community, in communion with the Holy Spirit.

Would I add anything to what Dr. Himes has said? If anything I would want to elucidate a few things that I think remain tacit in Dr. Himes remarks. Mainly I would like to highlight the distinction between lived religious experience and theological reflection. *Gaudium et Spes* and Dr. Himes begin talking about the Church (that is, the whole people of God) reading the signs of the times, but then Dr. Himes ends up musing about history and theology within a much narrower spectrum of second order reflection.

My concern here is not so much the political one of *who* gets to do the "reading" (Bishops, theologians, laity, etc.) Rather, I think it is important to note that "reading" the signs of the times involves both existential engagement—lived religious experience—and second order theological reflection. Both are necessary but they are quite distinct. Erudite academic insight is important, but not if divorced from commitment to the God of Jesus Christ and surrender to the workings of the Spirit. Authentic religiosity is virtuous but dangerous unless subjected to some kind of intentional reflection. (This is, perhaps, where the notion of "control" enters in—and it is a control I would endorse. I would just be happier if it were called "intentional reflection" or some such thing.)

Which leads me to the one thing I would add to the "demands" for a theological reading of the signs of the times. This is the self-appropriation of the theologian. Very simply, I would say that *an authentic theological reading of the signs of the times demands the self-appropriation of the theologian*. The beginning of history is autobiography. The place where we learn that history involves a tension between destiny and freedom, actuality and possibility is in our own embodiment. The reason theological questions arise with regard to history is that we are trying to make sense of our own stories, to construct meaningful narratives. I am not talking about navel gazing, I am talking about theologians reflecting on and "owning" their own religious lives unabashedly, while still living up to the exigencies of good scholarship.

This itself is a tension that needs to be negotiated. The canons for authentic living are not necessarily the canons of good scholarship. Being a faithful Catholic doesn't automatically make one a first-rate theologian. And we can all probably name tremendous theological scholars who are nevertheless religiously immature. I am not saying that holiness is a requirement for a genuinely theological reading of the signs of the times. Rather, I am saying that a theologian who is unreflective about his own life and social location is not likely to be able to read history very accurately. The empathy, the dialogue, the humility advocated by Dr. Himes will contribute to an authentic reading of the signs of the times to the degree that the theologian involved (1) throws herself into the arms of the living God, (2) reflects very carefully about such "throwing," and (3) recognizes the difference between the two.

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